

# **The Ecofeminism of Ivone Gebara**

**Elaine Nogueira-Godsey**

Supervisor: David Chidester  
Co-Supervisor: Sa'diyya Shaikh

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Para os meus filhos Natália e Lucas  
Que são minha inacabável fonte de alegria e inspiração!  
To Nina Hoel, a rare human being, who I have the luck to call friend  
and  
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months.

“Prefiro ser essa metamorfose ambulante  
Do que ter aquela velha opinião formada sobre tudo”  
(Raul Seixas, 1945-1989)

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# **THE ECOFEMINISM OF IVONE GEBARA**

Elaine Nogueira-Godsey

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis investigates the intellectual trajectory of the Brazilian feminist liberation theologian Ivone Gebara. Gebara's development and conceptualisation of the notion of 'immediacy' from a feminist perspective not only constitutes a central and critical feature of her theology, but also emerges as a key component in forging increased dialogue and cooperation between Southern and Northern ecofeminists. The immediate context of oppression experienced by poor Latin American women is the ground upon which Gebara has built her critique of patriarchal and apolitical Christian theological discourses, as well as capitalist ideologies. These multiple forms of oppression, Gebara argues, render women's experiences of marginalisation invisible or hidden within socio-cultural and economic-political immediate realities. This thesis proposes that the immediate reality of oppression lead Gebara to develop a specific methodological approach that is responsive to the experiences of women in particular. Gebara's praxis-orientated methodology also functions as a compass for the development of a political ecofeminist praxis.

As Ivone Gebara's work demonstrates, the political aspect of theology can be injected into the core of emerging ecotheologies. In the process, ecofeminist theologians can work to bridge the gap between theory and praxis. This thesis argues that Gebara's ecofeminist theology represents the embodiment of a history of resistance underwritten by her own experiences and of those struggling to survive around her. Developed in recognition of the ever-changing nature of postcolonial contexts, Gebara's theology could be considered one that is constantly "on-the-move". In dialogue not only with Southern and Northern scholars who are concerned with ecological and social justice, this thesis is developed in dialogue with those working with postcolonial theory. Starting from the events that gave rise to ecofeminism in the Global North, this thesis analyses the under-researched development of ecofeminism in Latin America. Gebara's work highlights forms of emerging imperialist and colonialist behaviours as it is manifested in postcolonial contexts, such as her native country of Brazil. In highlighting this

postcolonial factor, this thesis proposes a praxis-oriented methodology from a postcolonial perspective to restoring the political aspect of religion to the centre of emerging global ecofeminist theological discourse. Hence, this thesis draws attention to the under-researched work performed by Ivone Gebara and her role as an important mediator in global ecofeminism.

## PREFACE

When I began setting the aims of this thesis I had a clear outcome in mind. However, throughout these past four years I found myself rewriting and reconstructing the structure several times. Through approaching the stages in the evolution of Latin American feminist liberation theologian Ivone Gebara's thinking, I realised how significant it was to recognize her own learning process in order to understand the depth of Gebara's ecofeminist epistemological proposal. Throughout those stages Gebara learned about cross-cultural and multi-religious dialogue and about overcoming pre-defined cultural and political taboos. In doing so she learned to cross the academic borders and redefine theological concepts. She claimed that no social concepts about the human being can be infinite or universal and that theologians must adjust their ways of knowing according to the natural, evolving cycle of life. I came then to realize that the beauty of Gebara's ecofeminism is in providing an alternative epistemology that does not focus on bringing a solution to environmental problems, but rather forges a space for different ways of learning and transmitting knowledge. This requires a worldview that is always changing, adapting to new circumstances and changing human identities. Gebara's own worldview has been undeniably shaped by the reality of the marginalized of society and is constantly evolving according to today's needs. As such, as Gebara has articulated, this holistic anthropological understanding is constantly under revision due to being a process rooted in "moving ground" (Gebara, 2012). In the same way this thesis has gone through several changes and adapted to new information and new experiences (such as meeting Ivone Gebara at the American Academy of Religion's Annual Meeting in November, 2012). Adaptations, adjustments and changes are a common occurrence and generally expected when writing a thesis, but defenders of traditional Christian theology have historically rejected, covered up and denied that these elements are inherent to theology over time. Gebara's work embraces change when it comes to theology. It was through my own experience of change while writing a thesis that it became clear to me that this was at the heart of Gebara's theology and worldview.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: CONTEXTUALIZING THE THEOLOGY OF IVONE GEBARA

This thesis explores the work of Latin American feminist liberation theologian Ivone Gebara from a postcolonial perspective. It introduces Gebara's on-the-move liberationist methodology and ecofeminist perspective as a proposal to fruitfully enhance the task undertaken by global ecofeminist theologians. This task entails the liberation of women as well as the earth from socio-economic oppression with respect to the particular cultural context. My central focus is on Gebara's intellectual biography trajectories that inform her notable and important theology. Feminist and ecofeminist theologians within the Global North and South have been drawing on Gebara's liberationist theology in order to interweave ecofeminist socio-economic analysis with theology from different cultural contexts. Pioneering feminist theologian Rosemary R. Ruether (1996; 1998; 2005) and renowned ecofeminist theologian Heather Eaton (1998; 2001; 2003; 2005), have pointed out that Latin American feminist theologians are channelling the liberationist voice through the nexus of feminist methodology and ecological awareness. It is my view that Gebara's theological and anthropological work, in particular, still has much to offer current debates on ecological and gender injustices. Gebara's theological anthropology is rooted in a specific context, within the in-between spaces of her own positioning and theology. It is from those spaces and grounded on the experiences of oppression of poor women that her hybrid ecofeminist perspective has emerged. Therefore, it is my aim to contribute to the area of religious studies that has increasingly become known as ecofeminism by highlighting Gebara's experiences and activities throughout her career—establishing her as an important and unique thinker in our contemporary era.

My interest in Christian feminist theologies, ecology and gender analysis is based on my own life experiences and my Latin American background, in which *machismo* is still the norm. By *machismo* I am referring to masculine hetero-normativity and oppressive gender relations, which also affect women's religious experiences in the postcolonial Latin American Christian context. Nowadays, there are a number of scholarly works and activist movements on feminism, gender and liberation from a theological framework. Yet, the remaining of multi-layered challenges to achieving a healthier and egalitarian society in Latin America, especially in the

domestic space, cannot be taken for granted. Ecofeminism is an emerging movement which grapples with contemporary environmental deterioration and gender-related issues. This fairly new movement within Christianity exhibits a post-modern ethical approach to nature and society. Indeed, the ecofeminist manner of theologizing comprises dialoguing and learning from other faith traditions, resulting in innovative teachings that are both interconnected and complex. Although in the past, dominant modes of Christianity have tended to discourage the fostering of dialogical exchanges with other religions, particularly ones perceived as pagan, Christian ecofeminism by contrast promotes this dynamics of theologizing, embracing both diversity and difference. This approach is precisely what intrigues me and have played a pivotal role in helping me to situate the theoretical lenses of this thesis.

Ecofeminist theologians located in the Global North and the Global South have claimed the role of patriarchal religious anthropology in producing various social forms of ecological and gendered oppressions. The identification of a negative association between women and nature underlying Western patriarchal philosophy is a point of agreement among ecofeminists. However, due to different cultural, political and religious backgrounds, various points of divergence emerge between these ecofeminist thinkers. Some ecofeminists understood that there is a deeper truth emanating from the women-nature association that has been distorted by patriarchy, claiming that women are indeed more connected in essence to the earth than are men. Others, however, have rejected entirely any sort of essentialist thinking. They have rather grounded their ecofeminist analysis on notions that both women's and nature's identities have been partly the result of social constructionist's historical processes. It is from these points of divergence that I have understood how Ivone Gebara's feminist anthropology have presented an ecofeminist theology and ethics that have contributed to the mediation between Northern/Southern perspectives, therein creating a dialogue. In this thesis, this insight is invoked and expanded, by examining the modes of thinking and learning that naturally emerge from Gebara's scholarship.

The motivation to write this thesis emerged from my own life experiences. I agree with many feminist scholars of religion who have pointed out that any human project is deeply informed by the profound gendered dimensions of the researcher's own subjectivities, though it is not always acknowledged.

I was born and raised in central Brazil. Being part of a devoted Christian family, half Baptist and half Catholic, images of the Virgin Mary were a part of our religiosity. I was told from an early age that fulfilling certain prescribed female gender roles was all that I needed to do to please God and consequently have a happy life. The problem is that I did not find that to be true. I was a thinker and I did not want to follow pre-defined roles. I wanted to be a religious leader or a lecturer and I wanted to be free to think and make my own decisions. However, Mary and Jesus were always around to remind me about the docile and humble characteristics that I should rather seek. What to do with my life as a girl became an existential problem. Why did God create me with intellectual needs if I was not supposed to think for myself? Why did God create me with leadership skills if I was supposed to become a good submissive wife and focus on motherhood as fulfilment for life? Those were the kinds of questions that crossed my mind for quite a long period. However, I liked being a girl too much to start hating my own sex and I decided to study theology anyway, even though it was a predominantly male thing to do. I thought that perhaps I could find a new way to think about women's roles within Christianity.

While still in Brazil I did become a lecturer in theology. However, I could never explain why I could not just fit in and accept my female fate of having subordinate positions because of particular normative constructions of motherhood and marriage. Another aspect of our family life that constantly bothered me was that it was never mentioned or celebrated that my mother's side of the family came from the line of indigenous people within Brazil and Paraguay. I often deliberated if these two issues of gender and racial indigeneity were interrelated, although I was not familiar with such terminology or discourse at that time.

I moved to South Africa fourteen years ago. Here, in Cape Town, I began my journey as a postgraduate student in Religious Studies. The multicultural context and the lectures on critical terms in religion gave me the tools to analyse and made me aware of my own culture and the ways in which it shaped and affected me as a person. I found that analysing how my Brazilian cultural background informed my understanding of religion, gender and what it means to be human, revealed the power and complexity of the *machista* ideology. Yet, I realised that it was through my social relationships, work experiences and academic life in Cape Town as a woman, mother, wife, foreigner, friend, student, lecturer, eventually divorcee, and then again wife, that I also found similar forms of patriarchy among the local people. I finally understood that it is not only women that are prisoners of social roles, but that men's realities too are restricted and

regulated in today's world. This experience of crossing worlds has been revelatory and informative for my life. It has significantly influenced the theme and approach chosen for this thesis. In addition, being part of the cultural, religious and political changes in South Africa throughout these years has deeply affected my understanding about the enormous task that lies ahead of those who are interested in religion, gender, race and ecology, but also provided arenas of hope for a more just world for all.

My commitment to this thesis is also informed by a profound interest in the topics of religion, feminism and ecology, which emerged from my own experiences working with faith-based grassroots communities in Brazil and South Africa, and the invaluable experience of teaching an undergraduate course entitled "Religion, Spirituality and Ecology" in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town. This course was developed by myself (a Brazilian woman) and my colleague Dr Nina Hoel (a Norwegian woman). While informed by ecofeminist writings developed by women positioned in the Global North and South, and at the same time making connections between our own contexts of origin—Third and First world countries—this course enabled me to creatively explore my interest in feminist theology and ecology in a plural and inclusive way. My current situatedness in the South African landscape is thus marked by distinctive and complex feminist commitments and concerns.

Over the past several years the course on "Religion, Spirituality and Ecology" became a resourceful fountain of knowledge, aiding the development of my thesis. The students' different cultural and religious backgrounds shaped a classroom dynamic that illuminated what ecofeminist Heather Eaton (2005: 3) calls a "roundabout" traffic intersection. Our teaching material included ecofeminist work developed from localized experiences of poverty and colonization in the Global South. Once in the classroom, we witnessed through our discussions how our diverse backgrounds and experiences enabled the exchange of insights, forging our own ethical discourse. Alternative cosmologies and transformative ecofeminist anthropologies became important resources and tools for the students to innovatively engage with contemporary expressions of lived religion.

In turn, this academic experience combined with my own life experiences have given me the chance to witness the paradox of environmental philosophies and ecotheologies that, I argue, implicitly operate under a dominant idealistic Western epistemology that foregrounds human uniqueness above all living beings. According to many ecofeminist thinkers (see Gebara,



1999b)<sup>1</sup> this epistemology originates from the nature-culture division, which significantly intersect with the reality of domination and poverty so common in colonized contexts. The current problem with the ecotheological discourse is that on the one hand, ecological theories often start from the presupposition that ecological degradation is the result of selfish and irresponsible human behaviour, and many go as far as to recognize the problems inherent in an absolutized and unbalanced anthropology that frequently accompanies traditional theology.<sup>2</sup> Yet, on the other hand, the fact that poverty marginalization, gender imbalances among humans (such as under patriarchy) are often effects from the same cause, remain unrecognized.

Many ecological theories have developed disconnected from the daily material realities of those most effected by the ecological crisis. Likewise, it is also right to question to what degree ecological and ecotheologically orientated values and concerns have actually been developed in proximity to the disenfranchised needs. Have they been translated into practice within the different socio-economic and anthropological contexts? Is the impact of their argument visible or have they stayed in the academic level? In using the ethicist Anna L. Peterson's words, "are we talking and walking?" or are we just "talking" without making any difference? (Peterson, 2001: 47) For these reasons it is clear to me that ecological, religious meaning-making must start with the ecological and lived realities of the marginalized, of those who have largely suffered the impact of the ecological degradation. These voices have not been included sufficiently in the academic discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> The work of ecofeminist philosophers such as Val Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), have grounded the development of an ecofeminist analysis and critique that uncovered patterns of dualistic and hierarchical thinking operating through existing forms of domination (e.g. classism, sexism, racism and heteronormativity). Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980), has tracked the origins of dualistic thinking in order to understand the reasons for forms of domination emanating from the scientific revolution and modernity. The division between culture and nature have progressively contributed to perpetuating interconnected forms of ecological, socio-economic and gender exploitation. Karen Warren's "Ecofeminism and Ecology: Making Connections" (1987: 3-20), argued about the existence of a logic of domination, meaning the parallel domination of humans over nature and men over women.

<sup>2</sup> Ruether's "Deep Ecology, Ecofeminism, and the Bible" (2001) addresses the "ecofeminist charge that deep ecology is uncritical of sexism and implicitly androcentric in the way it critiques anthropocentrism" (2001: 229). Ariel Kay Salleh's "Deeper than Deep Ecology: The Ecofeminist Connection" (1984) is an example of the critique that deep ecologists have been, in general, oblivious to the overlapping sexist structures of domination upon women and nature. The work of Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology* (1985) has been one of the examples used in ecofeminist critiques. A similar critique has been addressed to ecotheologians, who have only to certain extent addressed anthropocentrism. The development of stewardship notions as replacement to anthropocentric forms of domination while assisting to develop ecological Christian ethics, has been pointed out by ecofeminist theologians, such as Gebara (1999b), as only masquerading the existing roots lying beneath the ecological crisis. The work of Calvin DeWitt's *A Sustainable Earth: Religion and Ecology in the Western Hemisphere* (1987) was also influential to popularize the idea that to be a good Christian is to care responsibly for the earth.

My decision to approach the work developed by feminist liberation theologian Ivone Gebara from a postcolonial and ecofeminist perspective, is thus underpinned by my own interest to foreground previously marginalised perspectives, which Gebara's work rests on. Gebara's critical theology highlights the patterns of colonial and neo-colonial projects that continues to inform gendered social roles and theologies in the Latin American context. Moreover, by using both postcolonial theories and ecofeminist frameworks in order to unpack Gebara's epistemology, I aim to contribute to the full recognition of Southern theorists to the level of knowledge producers by positioning them in the forefront of academic innovation. Jean and John Comaroff (2012) articulated that taking charge of our own academic expertise represents an end to the eternal role of theories developed in the Global North as our primary sources of investigation. My academic engagement and analysis of Gebara's on-the-move liberationist methodology and ecofeminist perspectives is one such endeavour.

### **1.1 Research Context**

Lynn White's widely renowned publication, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis", published in 1967, stirred important debates concerning the role of religion in light of our current environmental crisis. In his paper, White critiques the dualistic worldviews firmly entrenched within Western religious traditions that result in the separation of humans from nature and the divine. Additionally, the anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism that permeate religious discourses are identified as effectively producing relationships of domination vis-à-vis nature. Although explicitly critiquing the "Judeo-Christian" tradition, White's charge that religion is complicit in facilitating environmental degradation has given rise to novel critical engagements amongst theologians and religious studies scholars, as to the particular relationship between religion and ecology, and the role of religion in both enabling and averting the environmental crisis (Hoel and Nogueira-Godsey, 2011: 5-16).

It was during the 1970s, as the ecological movement was gaining strength and searching for a new global environmental ethic, that Western secular feminism formulated a critique of the socio-economic structures relating to women and nature. French feminist and ecological activist, Francoise d'Eaubonne, coined the term "ecofeminism" in 1972 as she argued that "the destruction of the planet is due to the profit motif inherent in male power" (in Ruether, 2005: 39). "The ecofeminist movement emerged in recognition of the destructive juxtapositions of

humanity versus nature, masculine versus feminine, and the correlation between the two binary categories” (Hoel and Nogueira-Godsey, 2011: 5). For d’Eaubonne these binaries was a result of hierarchically oppressive economic systems and not man *per se*. The important task ahead was to analyse the new forms of oppression that women were enduring throughout the world due to the new forms of science and technology demanded by capitalist thinking (Gebara, 2010b: 89-90). By highlighting and critiquing these new forms of oppression, ecofeminists exposed the hierarchies that permeate most social institutions, as seen through their prioritization of male over female, white over black, and humanity over nature. According to economist ecofeminist Mary Mellor, d’Eaubonne “called upon women to wrest power from ‘patriarchal man’, not to replace it with ‘power-to-the-women’ but ‘egalitarian management of a world to be reborn’” (Mellor, 1997: 44).

The issues pointed out by d’Eaubonne that became central to the emerging ecofeminist movement were: 1) the crisis of modernity, as the ecological cost of progress became apparent; 2) a critique of Western patriarchal man as the cause of that crisis; 3) a call to women/female/the feminine/feminism to be the agent(s) of change; 4) a seeming prioritization of the female gender, but a commitment to a non-gendered egalitarianism (Mellor, 1997: 44). Although d’Eaubonne saw the patriarchal system as the main problem, the implications of her proposal led to new discussions among feminists. While looking for solutions to social change, she argued that man lacked natural empathy towards nature. D’Eaubonne’s views notably reflected gender essentialism, which forged the initial cultural ecofeminist understanding that women were the key to a reformed social order. This view gave rise to two distinctively different points of view. First, a group of ecofeminists and feminists began formulating strategic social changes by presenting the idea of an existing “affinity between woman/femaleness and a benign attitude to the natural world” (Mellor, 1997: 44) that man appeared to lack (see also Starhawk, 1979; Spretnak, 1990: 1-14). Second, representing the other point of view is a group of ecofeminists that investigates whether woman is essentially closer to nature or whether woman has been positioned “on the nature side of the nature-culture split” (Ruether, 1996: 1-8; Shiva, 1996: 65-73). The latter underscores that women and nature have become object of both the desire and control of patriarchal and economically dominant systems (Gross, 2011: 22; Merchant, 1996). According to Mellor (1997: 45), among many others, “this mixture of a near-essentialist

conception of a woman-nature affinity and a non-gendered outcome” has become one of the most complex weavings of the ecofeminist web.

The ecofeminist critique of the women-nature connection became the core issue between some first-wave feminists and ecofeminists from the mid-1970s and during the 1980s. According to ecofeminists Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein, the rise of the Women’s Movement, born in the late 1960s, “dismantled the iron grip of biological determinism that had been used historically to justify men’s control over women. Feminists argued that social arrangements deemed to be timeless and natural had actually been constructed to validate male superiority and privilege” (Diamond and Orenstein, 1990: ix). As a result of feminists’ political strategy to open the space where women would be viewed as equal participants in the making of culture, all associations between women and nature had to be severed. In this way, it was stated that ecofeminism is simply a “public extension of the housewife role” (Salleh, 1997: 19). In other words, the connection made by ecofeminism between sexism and the environmental crisis was heavily critiqued by feminists who perceived this link as re-inscribing women as caretakers, keeping them in their stereotypical domestic sector. The conceptual and theoretical discussion around essentialism generated a space where divergent positions were exposed and challenged. This, in turn, resulted in a dynamic transformation of views and standpoints among both ecofeminists and feminists. Shifts in worldview have become a dynamic that underlines ecofeminist thinking from the mid-1990s. I would say that this elasticity is one of the most salient features of global ecofeminist religious discourses, and vital to its growth and success.

### ***Early Ecofeminism***

Ecofeminism as a movement and theory has emerged simultaneously in several countries. Its early stage was, however, predominantly developed in the United States. Ecofeminist philosopher Carolyn Merchant (1992) outlined the ecofeminist movement according to four categories of ecofeminism: cultural ecofeminism; liberal ecofeminism; social ecofeminism; and socialist ecofeminism. Conversely, Canadian ecofeminist theologian Heather Eaton (2001) has demonstrated that the categorizing of ecofeminisms today is a complex and difficult task. According to Eaton one must be aware “of the variations encompassed by the term” (2001: 79). Due to the fact that ecofeminism emerged from the work of social activists, including individuals and groups, as well as academics, the movements and theoretical analyses have many origins and

styles. While these diversities contributed to ecofeminist perspectives in different ways, in the United States, in its early stages, two main streams of ecofeminism became evident. One stream was characterised by radical, cultural and spiritual feminism, which tended to stress women's natural affinity to nature. The other stream of ecofeminism was grounded in social constructionist and radical political perspectives, mainly socialism and Marxism (see Mellor, 1997; Merchant, 1996).

The ecofeminist work situated within these dominant streams, encompasses two main analytical frameworks: 1) the cultural-symbolic domain, and 2) the social-economic sphere. Although these two frames of reference encompass distinct standpoints, it has also been argued that ecofeminist analyses show an artificial division (Eaton, 2005). This is to say that the weaving together of both analytical frameworks is essential to the development of an inclusive ecofeminist epistemology and praxis. In Ruether's words, "the first level is the ideological superstructure for the second...claiming that women are 'naturally' closer to the material world and lack the capacity for intellectual and leadership roles justifies locating them in the devalued sphere of material support for male elites and excluding them from higher education and public health" (Ruether, 2008c: 39). The cultural-symbolic domain is analysed and theorised by ecofeminists in order to conceptualise the deepest meanings of the women-nature association. These include the various ways in which the woman-nature connection is manifested in interpersonal, intimate, family, political and social relationships. The normative patterns of power have been examined in-depth in order to implode the patriarchal "truths" of what is deemed appropriate and moral (Eaton, 2005: 29).

The socio-economic sphere is theorised through empirical analyses of the concrete way life is lived. For example, deforestation, water contamination and corporate control of common land are investigated in relation to how those conditions impact people's health. Empirical data is gathered in order to expose and connect illness with the use of pesticides, poisoned water or polluted air. This data is often used as a resource for challenging national and global economic powers and those responsible for decision-making (Eaton, 2005: 28). Ecofeminists have found that as environmental degradation increases, women are disproportionately affected in relation to daily and material experiences. Hence, the overturning of economic and social hierarchies is necessary in order to liberate women and nature (Merchant, 1996: 14). In dialogue with holistic and social ecology, this socio-economic ecofeminist approach critically investigates the

“international economic system, trade, militarism, development and consumerism, within contexts of growing social instability, ecological ruin, environmental refugees, and the desperate life conditions of women” (Eaton, 2005: 28). Ecofeminists who base their analysis on the socio-economic approach also engage in working to transform these realities by envisioning a society which integrates all human and non-human beings in more benevolent relationships. They seek a dramatic restructuring of the market economy’s use of women and nature as resources, rather than a redistributive approach. In general, they share an understanding that collective action and collective rights are more empowering and more important than individual actions and rights (Plant, 1990: 155-164).

David Kinsley (1995: 164-177) contends that all ecofeminists agree that the solutions to ecological problems are directly related to strategically ending the oppression of women. In this manner, ecofeminists have brought a more nuanced discussion of gender oppression. The work of ecofeminist Judith Riss (2006) in Chile and feminist theologian Denise Ackermann (1996) in South Africa, for example, recognize that the dominance of patriarchal perspectives and interests that have silenced and subordinated women of specific classes and races form part of ecological injustice. Recently, Buddhist feminist Rita Gross stated that “ecofeminism is an attempt to develop a more nuanced and complex discussion on gender oppression that does not single-mindedly reduce all problems to problems of unjust relationships between men and women” (Gross, 2011: 20). On the other hand, although expanding the analysis on gender oppression to incorporate the oppression of nature as an intertwined issue, has formed the starting point of all ecofeminist critiques, still ecofeminists have not yet come to a shared consensus on how to forge social changes and cultural transformation.

A classic example would be the alternative ways that feminists within religious traditions have responded to the ecofeminist charges against scientific ideology and Western dominant religious traditions, particularly Christianity. In investigating patriarchal religions as sources as well as perpetrators of the domination of women and nature, some ecofeminists have turned their back and completely rejected dominant traditional religions and searched instead for alternative forms of earth-based religious traditions,<sup>3</sup> like those of many tribal peoples. Some

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<sup>3</sup> As will be discussed in chapter two, ecofeminist spiritualities range from alternative forms of spirituality within the main Western religious traditions to earth-based forms of spirituality. Earth-based spirituality is an umbrella term that ranges from different indigenous religious traditions, Wicca and Goddess-worshipping, to Asian religious traditions.

ecofeminists have found within Goddess traditions alternative ways to celebrate and value women's bodies and nature (see for example Christ, 2003). From their point of view the celebration of the female body results in harmony in society, between the sexes, and between humankind and nature. A hypothetical "pre-patriarchal" society was popularized by Riane Eisler in *The Chalice and the Blade* (1987), where a celebration of the divine through female symbolic representations was emphasised. Eisler (1987) argues that the worship of a single male deity was not normative prior to Christianity's conquest of the Western world. Feminist debates emerged as a result of the literal reading of this "pre-patriarchal" myth and many feminists argued that female divinities, who were often perceived as immanent beings, enhanced women's natural connection with the earth and thus constituted the foundation for female empowerment and social changes. For social ecofeminists who were advocating the liberation of women and nature "through overturning economic and social hierarchies" (Merchant, 1996: 14) religious views did not sufficiently address the need for socially engaged political changes (see Biehl, 1991; Seager, 1993). However, social ecofeminists' tendency to generalize the diverse views within ecofeminist religious discourses is also problematic. Among feminist theologians there are those working from a liberationist perspective, such as Brazilian Ivone Gebara and Canadian Heather Eaton, whose proposals are grounded in cultural-symbolic critique and socio-economic analysis in order to forge political ecofeminist stances that are not related to essentialism. For example, Eaton (see 2001; 2005) has proposed an ecofeminist liberation theology and hermeneutics to bridge the gap between academic talk and an ecological ethical praxis. Inspired by the work developed by feminists situated within Third World countries, including (and perhaps particularly) Gebara, Eaton's proposal is one informed by the everyday experiences of women located in specific socio-economic and political contexts.

However, the initial domination from North American ecofeminist literature that largely concentrated on cultural-symbolic theory (and also alternative earth-based forms of spiritualities) as a solution to the environmental crisis, over-shadowed the political urgencies presented by social/Socialists ecofeminists through its early stages. As a result, during the 1980s and 1990s the ecofeminist political impact was still limited. According to Mellor (1997), this was largely due to the fact that ecofeminism initially tended to be identified solely with its cultural essentialist and spiritual roots and as such was "subject to critiques of essentialism, romanticism and political naïvety" (Mellor, 1997: 45). These critiques contributed to the misconception of

ecofeminism as exclusively a white, middle-class and Goddess-worshipping movement. After the mid-1990s the work developed by ecofeminists (often independent of their religious background) were more focused on political changes, which was more central within the global ecofeminist movement. Eaton has however noted that ecofeminism continues to be “haunted” due to uneasy ecofeminist combinations, more specifically between “essentialism and religion (usually Goddess), or spirituality (multi-form)” (Eaton, 2001: 80). She has clarified that in the same way that the woman-nature connection attracted academics from many different disciplines (e.g. anthropology, sociology, history, science, and economics); feminists from different religious traditions also began investigating the women-nature connection (2001: 79). Women from Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Native American traditions as well as Wiccan, Goddess, and Neo-Pagan circles, among others, have forged an array of ecofeminist theological or spiritual perspectives as well as critiques. Due to the many complex connections at play, for Eaton ecofeminism is better explained as an umbrella term, which represents “an analysis, a symbol for a change of consciousness, or a vision or insight into alternative ways of understanding, organizing and relating to the world” (2001: 80). To explain or understand ecofeminism or ecofeminists as a monolithic group, in which unified political strategies and forms of spirituality are proposed, would be a distorted and misinformed view of this heterogeneous movement.

### ***The Circulation of Knowledge***

As ecofeminism theory circulated and travelled beyond its initial place of origin it eventually reached the Global South. Due to contextual differences and cultural dynamics, ecofeminism as a perspective and analysis re-emerged and gained new layers of meaning in the Global South. The interconnected issues of poverty, race and class that mark many women in the Third World were exposed and interconnected to ecological problems. For example, health issues were linked to the lack of clean water and air, and impoverished living conditions were linked to questions of land and space. The struggle for survival within these realities provided concrete connections between theory and praxis and contributed in further nuancing the complexity as well as fluidity of the ecofeminist movement. The work developed by feminists in the South drew the attention of ecofeminist theologians within the Global North who were interested in a cross-cultural and multi-religious dialogue. Within Christianity, Rosemary R. Ruether was one of the first feminist



theologians to intentionally engage with and foreground the views and experiences of feminist theologians positioned in the Global South and purposefully bring these into the international ecofeminist debate. Ruether's *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism and Religion* (1996) became a landmark in expanding the ecofeminist religious discourse by opening up a space to women from Latin America, Asia and Africa to voice their experiences of ecology, gender and religion. In promoting a cross-cultural and interfaith dialogue among women who explored the women-nature connection within the Global South, Ruether introduced a resourceful strategy to overcome initial blind spots of Northern ecofeminist thinking.

By entering into dialogue between initial ecofeminist theories and the material realities of women in the South, it was Ruether's hope to inspire Northern ecofeminists, who were possibly more inclined to the cultural-symbolic theory, to work on developing a more open ended analysis to local and global oppressive contexts. Ruether exposed a paradox among those spiritual ecofeminists who were articulating social changes via claiming the true model for power-relations and ecological ethics within ancient earth-based religious tradition, whilst at the same time, not providing the means to those who have been historically marginalised to overcome social injustice. Ruether invited Northern ecofeminists to question their own Western imperialist impulses "in appropriating the ideas and practices of indigenous peoples of other worlds...without having any real relationship to these people, as some Euroamericans have done toward the indigenous peoples of North America" (1996: 7). Her critical insight clearly outline the importance of learning in solidarity and to be self-reflective as distinct ecofeminist ideals. Furthermore, while some middle-class Northern ecofeminists might find Western traditional religious traditions problematic for the ecofeminist discourse, less privileged women within their own Northern affluent contexts, are continuing to find strength and resources in them. Hence, the awareness of multi-layered forms of empowerment existing in different contexts emerges as a challenge and means to re-adjust the ecofeminist lenses, a crucial point raised by non-white feminists in the context of the dominant Western feminist discourse (see Williams, 1989).

In my reading, it is precisely through recognizing how women's multiple positioning lends itself to the development of a variety of analytical tools and commitments, and in encouraging inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue between Northern and Southern ecofeminisms, that intellectual and experiential exchange may become methodology and praxis.

### ***Emerging Ecofeminist Thinking in the Latin American Context***

From here, I would like to draw attention to the ecofeminist movement in the Global South, more specifically the Latin American context during the 1970s. In Latin America, the focus during the 1970s was on the emerging liberationist process. Many Latin American countries were still ruled by military dictatorship, including Brazil. The socio-political context was intense as militant rule resulted in severe human rights violations and increased poverty among the population. This in turn led to the rise of peasant revolts and the emergence of various insurgent movements all over the continent. It was in this postcolonial context, and as part of a larger liberationist movement throughout Latin America, that feminist liberation theology began to take shape.

During the 1970s, male and female theologians from various Latin American countries and around the world developed what became known as liberation theology. Critical to the oppressive political and economic system, their theology incorporated and foregrounded the struggle of the marginalized. Liberation theologians charged orthodox Christian theology with not engaging sufficiently to the economic needs of the population. Liberation theologians proposed an alternative Christian theology grounded in their social reality. Positioning the poor and marginalised as the hermeneutical *locus* of their theology opened the door to socially engaged readings of the bible. Within this context, and under the influence of second wave feminism, Latin American women liberation theologians started to identify patriarchal ideologies within their own religious traditions and directed a critique to patriarchal culture, which also included dominant forms of liberation theology.

During the 1980s, emerging feminist theologians proposed ways to untangle the androcentric threads woven into the social and cultural fabric of traditional theological hermeneutics. According to Gebara (1995a), feminist theologians situated in Latin America identified and critiqued androcentric readings of sacred scriptures often informed by Third World feminist critiques. The interaction between Latin American theologians with African and Asian theologians, encouraged by the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), promoted both knowledge and cultural exchanges. Through this valuable network, women discussed shared and unique forms of oppression and promoted inter-faith and cross-cultural dialogue in order to unearth exploitative ideology permeating socio-economic and cultural contexts. Gradually, women theologians from India, Africa, Latin America and Asia

embarked on a global ecumenical feminist journey, redefining their religious positionings in light of their own social contexts. In Latin America, Gebara, along with Mexican theologians Elsa Tamez and María Pilar Aquino, and Brazilian Maria Clara Bingemer, among others, began analysing the socio-economic conditions of poor women in light of a deeper cultural critique. Gebara, For example, by paying attention to women's domestic life, revealed the multiple ways that oppressive gender power relations were carried out into the public sphere, a reality that up to that time had been overlooked by liberation theologians.

Toward the end of the 1980s, ecofeminist views began to circulate among feminist theologians within the Global South. Ecofeminism in Latin America emerged as a result of a producing empirical and contextual knowledge, as well as reproducing existing knowledge from a Latin American perspective. Leading this new development was Ivone Gebara with her hybrid and holistic ecofeminist perspective. The originality of Gebara's ecofeminist perspective lies in the fact that she was simultaneously informed by both North American and European feminist thinking, as well as by those who in the postcolonial era have not been officially acknowledged as knowledge producers, particularly poor women. Gebara's own desire for liberation reflects an engaged style of dialoguing and learning from those positioned in affluent and poor contexts. Her ecofeminism emerges as a third way of thinking. It is neither solely informed from the view point of women that work the land on a daily basis and suffer the effects of ecological degradation, nor is it entirely grounded on the theoretical and critical thinking forged by Northern ecofeminists and Southern liberation theologians. It is rather a combination of all of these knowledge systems. Gebara's ecofeminism is above all based on her own experiences as an urban woman who dedicated her scholarship and life to defending human integrity and empowered decision-making—deconstructing the gendered social roles constructed by patriarchal culture and religion.

The dialogue between ecofeminists from the Global North and South has not only served the purpose to transform both theological approaches, but in today's globalized world it seems to be the most logical alternative to the enhancement of global ecofeminist religious discourse. I have chosen Ivone Gebara's work in order to foreground this view through this thesis due to two main reasons: 1) although Gebara has published more than thirty books and more than one hundred articles, only three of her books have been translated into English. The lack of translation of her works has created a scholarly gap within any discourse that is concerned with

women's empowerment locally and globally; 2) as a consequence of the first point, Gebara's feminist and theological perspectives still have much to offer the global ecofeminist discourse than what has already been discussed of her ideas or perhaps even acknowledged by the global ecofeminist discourse.

Over her long career, Ivone Gebara has made substantial contributions to liberation theology (Gebara 1986; 1987; 1992; 1993), feminist theology (1989a; 1989b; 1991a; 1991b; 2000c; 2003a; 2007b; 2010b), and ecofeminist theology (Gebara 1994a; 1994b; 1996; 1997b; 1999b; 2002b; 2003c; 2010b). Her interests range from the recovery of tradition, for example in her works on Mary (Gebara and Bingemer, 1987; Gebara, 2009a) to the transformation of tradition, such as her proposal for a new theological anthropology (1989b; 1999b), a new model for God (1993; 1999b; 2009a) and the Trinity (Gebara, 1994b; 1996). She has also written on Christology—evil & salvation (Gebara 1994b; 2002c), ecological education (2009b) and religious diversity, including panentheism (Gebara 1995a; 1999b; 2000b). Situated in Latin America, Gebara's work has engaged the global concerns of ecofeminism. Her works, particularly since the 1990s, foreground an alternative Christian anthropology and ecological ethic. Elements of what would become a major component of her holistic ecofeminist perspective were already part of her theology, particularly the view on the interrelated realities of all living beings. Gebara has also engaged questions of politics, socialism, knowledge construction and the formation of ecological ethics among marginalized groups. These themes are central in: *Vulnerabilidade, Justiça e Feminismos: Antologia de Textos* (*Vulnerability, Justice and Feminisms: An Anthology of Texts*, 2010b); *O Que É Saudade?* (*What is Yearning?* 2010a); *O Que É Cristianismo* (*What Christianity Is*, 2008b); *O Que É Teologia Feminista?* (*What Is Feminist Theology?* 2007b); *O Que É Teologia?* (*What Is Theology?* 2006); *As Águas do Meu Poço: Reflexões sobre Experiências de Liberdade* (*Waters from My Well: Reflections on Experiences of Liberation*, 2005a); *La Sed de Sentido: Búsquedas Ecofeministas en Prosa Poética* (*Thirst for Meaning: The Ecofeminist Search in Poem and Prose*, 2002b); *Cultural e Relações de Gênero* (*Culture and Gender Relations*, 2002a) and *A Mobilidade da Senzala Feminina* (*Female Slavery House in Motion*, 2000a).

Although Gebara's work has been engaged by for example Rosemary R. Ruether (1996; 1998; 2005; 2000a; b; 2008c) and Heather Eaton (2001; 2003; 2005), and she has featured in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Nature* (Taylor and Kaplan, 2005: 689-690), I contend that

Gebara has not received adequate attention in the Northern American and European literature on feminism or ecofeminism (see also Puleo, 1994). Gebara's work has been noted, in passing, in discussions of liberation theology and ecofeminism (see Keller, C. 2004; Ottmann, 2002; Maher, 2008; Althaus-Reid, 2009; Pears, 2010). Juan José Tamayo (2011: 384-394) and Josep Ignasi Saranyana (2002: 525-527) have started a more detailed study of Gebara's work. However, no comprehensive review or analysis of her career and works has previously been undertaken. This thesis intends to meet that need.

I suggest that the reason for the paucity of research on Gebara's theological anthropology is probably quite obvious. Because most of her work is written in Portuguese, the only books that have been translated to English are: *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation* (2002c), originally written in French as *Le Mal au Feminin* (1999a); *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (1999b) and *Mary Mother of God, Mother of the Poor* (1989), which she co-authored with Maria Clara Bingemer. While *Mary Mother of God, Mother of the Poor* (1989) was written with the goal of conceptualising a liberation theology of Mary through feminist lenses, still highly relevant in the Latin American context, *Out of the Depths* and *Longing for Running Water* are more well-known within international academic circles. In *Longing for Running Water*, Gebara focused on the construction of an ecofeminist epistemology. For Gebara, knowledge construction, production or reproduction can only be explained as part of "knowing as process" (1999b: 54). In reproducing knowledge, Gebara initially proposed a feminist liberation anthropology, which in simple terms is an effort to ground women's experiences as equally important into the liberationist theological discourse. This feminist anthropology was transformed into a holistic theological anthropology, in which a new category was added, the ecological aspect. A holistic anthropology is compelled by the awareness of the human as a "being-in-relationship" (2002c: 34) with "the earth and with the entire cosmos" (1999b: 79). Moreover, the interrelationality between all living beings and non-living things, and the existing relationship—and forms of oppression—between nature and culture. In *Out of the Depths*, Gebara takes her holistic framework further and from a phenomenological perspective discusses the unrecognised forms of evil that women experience. By unrecognised evil, Gebara refers to the various forms of injustice entrenched in patriarchal religious anthropology and gendered asymmetrical social relations that are normalized or

naturalized. She approaches these forms of evil through a liberationist, gender and ecofeminist analysis.

In light of the above it is clear why Gebara's *Longing for Running Water* and *Out of the Depths* are the books that have received most attention by international ecofeminists. Other than the fact that those are two of the only three books translated to English, they are also the ones discussing ecofeminist issues. However, *Mary Mother of God, Mother of the Poor* is equally enlightening as Gebara offers an analysis on marginalised social contexts and its peoples' expressions of religiosity in conjunction with a keen eye towards ecological circumstances. While much of the international engagement with Gebara's work is related to her ecofeminist epistemology, I contend that, Gebara's embedded and embodied worldview is often missed by English-speaking audiences. Her feminist liberation anthropology was first articulated in *Mary Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*. Although I do not foreground Gebara's Marian liberation theology in this thesis, it is important to bear in mind that her own development from a liberation theologian to a feminist liberation theologian, and eventually to an ecofeminist theologian, the devotion to liberationist ideals has remained consistent, and she continues to employ liberationist methods in her own praxis. Gebara's theological anthropology and the process of reaching the fundamental ecofeminist understanding of relatedness are under-researched or perhaps unknown. Asian feminist theologian Namsoon Kang (2004: 100-117) has made a similar point by arguing that the complexity of the intellectual work developed by non-Western feminist theologians is often lost, perhaps also due to the difficulty of accessing resources in non-English languages. Kang highlights the urgent need to have a greater number of Third World scholarly works and resources translated so that access is broadened. This process of translation will not only contribute to contemporary knowledge production, but also offer possibilities for exchange, which might result in new perspectives and analyses.

## **1.2 Conceptual Frameworks**

In 1998 Heather Eaton explained that while Ruether (1996) suggested that Northern ecofeminists tend to develop their critical work towards the women-nature connection by emphasizing the cultural-symbolic level, Ruether's point was not "to disparage Northern ecofeminism, but to broaden and situate it within the global realities" (Eaton, 1998: 75). By emphasising that the ecological crisis is intrinsically connected with "the baseline reality of daily impoverishment

fac[ing] most women and children of the Third World” (Eaton, 1998: 75), Ruether opened the space for a worldview re-adjustment within the ecofeminist movement. Her approach to connecting ecological concerns in the North through dialogue and learning from women who live under the legacy of colonial history parallels the work of scholars within what has become known as postcolonial theory. For example, Robert Young has interpreted Edward Said’s *Orientalism* not only as a critique towards the imperialistic (European) circulation of knowledge through the dialectical discourse of colonizer-colonized relationships, but also as a treatise on the social issues produced by this knowledge circulation that were effectively invisible to those producing knowledge.<sup>4</sup> It is my view that some of the dominant themes analysed in postcolonial theory illuminates the ways Latin American feminist liberation theology—responding to socio-economic issues—can contribute to the development of global ecofeminism. First, by narrating how everyday life unfolds at the margins, the interconnection of ecofeminist sites of struggle within current global and patriarchal capitalism are exposed. Second, envisioning strategies for social change, offer possibilities in an increasingly independent world to partake in progressively shared intersectional ecofeminist analysis.

As previously mentioned, in this thesis I wish to take Ruether’s initiative further by developing an extended approach to Gebara’s intellectual biography. It is, however, from a postcolonial perspective that I read and analyse Gebara’s feminist liberation and ecofeminist intellectual trajectory. While researching Gebara’s biography I became aware of the interdependence of her academic trail and her religious life. Her commitments to the poor and to the liberationist cause are intrinsically intertwined with her lifelong search for freedom. For Gebara, freedom represents the right to think outside theologically, culturally or socio-economically imposed gendered scripts. It is as an unbounded thinker that Gebara emerges as mediating a model of embodied ecofeminist theory. The processes and transitions evident in her scholarly work have followed this way of knowing and of being, which is embedded in the immediate needs of today’s world. Gebara’s ways of knowing-and-being reflect an openness to learn from all living beings and non-living things, and express a mode of epistemological generosity. This generosity, as a mode of relationship, reflects the central theme within the ecofeminist proposals around ecological and social ethics. Gebara’s embodied methodology is

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<sup>4</sup> Young, Robert. 2013. “Late Postcolonialism.” Lecture presented at the University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa. July 16<sup>th</sup>.

“on-the-move” and as such illuminates an ecofeminist epistemology that would be better described as an epistemology of generosity in motion. Yet, it was through pursuing this deepened analysis of Gebara’s praxis-oriented ecological ethics that it became clear to me the significant role that the North/South feminist exchange played in shaping Gebara’s own views. It is with this important collaboration in mind that this thesis first aims to articulate Gebara’s epistemology of generosity and her “on-the-move” anthropological methodology. At the same time, the thesis also aims to draw attention to the significant role of ecofeminist dialogical dynamics.

This thesis seeks to do more than just point out the differences or contradictions between the ecofeminist works developed in the Global South and North. Such an approach would only contribute in maintaining forms of polarization while this thesis aims to do the opposite. The idea of a methodology that highlights ecofeminist work emerging from the Global South as a way to advance global ecofeminism is not based on attitudes of “we know better”. Drawing on the Comaroff’s, it is “because the history of the present reveals itself more starkly in the antipodes, it challenges us to make sense of it, empirically and theoretically, from that distinctive vantage” (2012: 7). I argue that there is more to be learned from a North-South ecofeminist dialogical dynamic than what has previously been explored. The logic following this claim is illustrated in chapters three and four, where I explore how Gebara’s ecofeminism is the result or the product from cross-cultural exchanges of knowledge. This hybrid feminist or ecofeminist liberationist thinking represents the by-product of theory and material realities as it is lived in affluent and poor contexts from both Northern and Southern perspectives. It is a third-way or perhaps a bridge between scholarly work and praxis. Hence, the hybrid works that emerge from postcolonial contexts exhibit its importance by providing a hermeneutical lens that, according to Eaton, encapsulates “the concrete connections between theory and praxis, North and South, affluent and poor, and the actual life and death struggles of the many women of the world” (Eaton, 1998: 76). These intersections articulated by Eaton are a major theme throughout this work, with the intent of expanding and analysing these points of convergence/divergence.

The themes on hybridity and the in-between spaces have emerged naturally from analysing Gebara’s theological work. In this thesis my engagement with these themes are informed by the works of Homi K. Bhabha (1994) and R.S. Sugirtharajah (1998a; b). The terminology and concepts on Global South and North are inspired by Jean and John Comaroff (2012). The Comaroffs argue that with the end of the Cold War the term “the third world” has



been replaced by the more popular label “the global south” (2012: 45). Although, the idea behind the Global South has more complex connotations than the former geographical and ideological “the third world”, the term itself is “something of a synonym,” but only one that cannot be completely defined (2012: 47). The label of Global South “bespeaks a *relation*” (2012: 47), which indicates a sort of common denominator among those countries—the fact that many were once colonies—albeit not necessarily colonized by the same people or during the same period. Here, the South represents context, rather than content. In Africa, Latin America and Asia within the anticolonial and liberationist struggles, as well as post-independence nationalistic movements, emerging social scientists stressed the South’s own anthropological ways to construct knowledge, and ways of being in the world. Through rejecting North American and European theories or lifestyle they opted to rupture with the past and fashion new possibilities by declaring originality. This historical process has showed its value and importance. However, the awareness that we are all part of a historical process has determined Gebara’s desire (and my own) to overcome the very dualism of Global South and North. It is as a dialectical production of cultural and social processes that I approach the Global South in this thesis.

The discussion on the religious hybrid, as articulated by postcolonial theory, is a good starting point for grasping the subjective nature of Gebara’s anthropological proposal. R.S. Sugirtharajah (1998b: 16) interprets postcoloniality as representing the temporal space where the once-colonized Other persistently attempts to take up their role as historical subjects. Liberation theology’s emphasis on justice and on the construction of a discourse that values the full person led to the rise of liberationist feminist, queer, indigenous and Afro-Latino-centred discourses. It is throughout the history of resistance in Latin America that I see Gebara’s ecofeminist perspective as a representation of a religiously hybrid proposal developed in the in-between spaces of the postcolonial context.

Bhabha (1994) articulated through his notion of hybridity that “the encounters and negotiations of differential meanings and values under the ‘colonial textuality’, its governmental discourses and cultural practices” have forged the context where the hybrid was born (1994: 173). Similarly, the Comaroffs explained that the Global South is the “dialectical products of a global world in motion,” which its content has been “determined, over time, by everyday material, political and cultural processes” (2012: 47). As a result of the dialogical nature of colonialism a hybrid Christianity took shape in the Latin American context. Analytically, this

dialogical dynamic was a complex feature of the colonial context, moulded by power-relations and multiple forms of resistance. Thus, it took place in between spaces of encounters and dis-encounters, a third space or the in-between space. The in-between space represents the shared product from intersecting cultural and social dimensions, it is from analysing this state of aporia that the implications of the religious hybrid on contemporary constructions of knowledge are better exposed. According to Michelle A. Gonzalez (2004: 62-63) the hybrid religion which emerged from these in-between spaces are neither brought by the colonizer, nor the indigenous “Other,” but were created from/within the in-between space. As such, it is not the mere replication of former cultures, behaviours, religions and identities. Paralleling this perspective the Comaroffs invoked the notion of “the South as a window on the world at large,” which is made of “a multitude of variously articulated flows and dimension[s]...a world that, ultimately, transcends the dualism of north and south” (2012: 47). Gebara’s theology is about that world. The contribution of her thinking to broader ecofeminist perspectives lies in providing insights to better understand how to strategically impact those who are unaware about the ways that their behaviour and religious traditions perpetuate oppression towards women and nature.

Furthermore, as Bhabha (1994) explains, it is in these in-between spaces that cutting-edge translation and negotiation take place and likewise carry the burden of the meaning of culture. Gebara’s ecofeminist perspective, situated in the vulnerable reality of those at the margins, while simultaneously being informed by Northern and Southern feminist views, has contributed to rich contemporary notions of religious anthropology that reveal the human relationship with God and its implications for the human and non-human community. Gebara’s hybrid ecofeminist thinking represents a third-way and a bridge—a more integrated starting point—for addressing the complexity of subjectivity and the multiplicity of ways that people relate to each other and to the nature. This versatility and fluidity is central to the global ecofeminist discourse due to its central aim of empowering women within their own cultural and ecological contexts. Eaton contends that ecofeminist theologies generally take “its cues from ecofeminist *theory* in which the ideological issues are prevalent and steers away from the global ecofeminist discourse on the material connections” (2001: 90). Furthermore, she (2001: 78; 98; 90-91) argues that if ecofeminist theologies are to be transformative they must envision how religion can become an active political player. For Eaton liberation theologies’ methodology “of orienting theology to

the issues of the world” (2001: 78) must be integrated into the ecofeminist discourse in order to bridge the problematic gap between theory and practice.

Moreover, the critical concerns related to Gebara’s views on gender oppression and the ecological crisis are discussed throughout this thesis in tandem with social ecology’s main tenets. Social ecology scholars offer a poignant critique towards capitalism and its negative impacts on the land, nature and animals, and the interrelated issues of poverty and human struggle for survival. According to liberation theologian and social ecologist Leonardo Boff, “this model [capitalism] is not capable of creating wealth without at the same time generating poverty. It cannot stimulate economic development without at the same time producing social exploitation, internally and globally...it cannot produce wealth without at the same time ravaging the environment” (236-237). In light of Gebara’s ecofeminist perspective, the work of some social ecologists, such as Boff, highlights some of the main concerns underpinning the global ecofeminist discourse.

### **1.3 Gebara’s Life Trajectory**

Barbara Tuchman (1982) has explained that a biography can be interpreted as representing glimpses of history. According to Tuchman, to write a biography is to capture a prism of history via personalizing the universal (1982: 97). From a feminist perspective I would argue that it is via biographical works that the private and particular can be gleaned as different from normative and universalized forms of male experiences. To interpret one’s life and the essence of what it encompasses is indeed a complex task. Most biographies have been written with the purpose of being inspirational or representing a model for those who are seeking motivation and new examples in life. Nonetheless, most published biographies are about men and their life’s accomplishments. This section is focused on the biography of Ivone Gebara, presenting an insight into the formulation of her academic trajectory that illuminates Gebara’s praxis-oriented epistemological position. Although, this is not primarily a biographical thesis it would be impossible to discuss Gebara’s thinking without dedicating space to her biography. This is so because the nature of Gebara’s scholarship is informed by her vocational experience. My aim is to render visible a woman’s lifelong commitment to social justice based on her calling and tenacious resolution to be the guide of her own life in the private and public spheres of life. Such an approach to Gebara’s biography is important, firstly for the feminist notion that the “personal

is political”. Through this section it is exposed once more how objective knowledge production is rife with scholars’ subjective modes of engagement, a point particularly stressed by many feminist scholars (see Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1987; Bhavnani, 1994). And secondly, Gebara’s multiple positionings have lent themselves to the development of a variety of analytical tools and commitments that have emphasized the feminist insight that experience forms the base of knowledge production.

From Gebara’s perspective every human being is called by God to freedom (2005a: 19). In this view, throughout the past decades, Gebara’s searching for liberation has continuously shaped her understanding of what the theological task ought to be. Gebara is a living example of progression from a purely liberationist viewpoint to the ecofeminisms emerging out of localized experiences. Her theology could be described as on-the-move due to her emphasis on the dynamics of the marginalised in her feminist liberation methodology. It is evident that poor women’s daily experiences have played a pivotal role in the development of her transforming liberationist perspective. Nonetheless, Gebara’s openness and humility in learning from others’ experiences have largely contributed to the development of her scholarship and feminist theology. Her pioneering feminist work and life have inspired Christian women locally and globally to contest the universalization of men’s experiences and the theology that have objectified and diminished women’s place within the Church.

From here, I will focus on the stories from Gebara’s autobiography and work, which illuminate the essence of her scholarship and leadership in a context of socio-economic and cultural struggle. Gebara is a Catholic nun, a Brazilian Sister of Our Lady (Canonesses of St. Augustine) and pioneering Latin American feminist liberation theologian. Religious leaders are often understood as receiving a special calling from God to perform a particular role in the community or in cloistered orders. This calling is generally identified with a summons from the divine, after which the individual must adjust his/her ways of life and work. These ascetic and communal practices vary across the spectrum of Christianity. American Catholic queer liberation theologian Mary Hunt (2012) has rightly explained that nuns are generally and mistakenly given “a quasi-clerical status...they are consecrated to religious life, but are not clergy” (Hunt, 2012). Gebara has pointed out that although women do not have a recognized clerical status they often make up the majority of the members of a Church and also the unrecognized leadership roles of the community in the Latin American context. Gebara’s biography demonstrate her status as a

leader, unrecognized by Church authorities, whose vocational career ruptures with all naturalized associations between God's will and men's exclusive rights to religious leadership. The themes and questions arising out of gender and feminist critique in this section emerge naturally out of Gebara's commitment in searching for freedom as well as her right to define her social role free from conventional patriarchal norms imposed on women.

Gebara has never entirely defined the meaning of freedom. However, as previously mentioned, from her perspective every human being has a calling to freedom. This is, in a sense, their vocation. As such, the quest to play a role unbounded from culturally pre-determined ideas is to follow one's divine calling. Through a poetic and informal writing style, Gebara articulates that liberation for her is first:

The presence of a feeling that something essential is lacking in my life, and simultaneously in other people's lives. To overcome entirely this 'missing' or 'yearning' feeling is impossible. There will always be new situations to trigger this permanent search for freedom innate to the human...The path of freedom is open, plural and without limits. There are no ways that this path can be explained or defined by using one concept or one single experience. It must be lived as an essential component of the entire human experience (Gebara, 2005a: 19).<sup>5</sup>

For Gebara, the unknown future is part of freedom; to construct one's own path is part of liberation; to have the right to re-create one's own understanding is empowerment. It is with this belief that Gebara searches for freedom, knowledge and social justice.

In her autobiography, *Águas do Meu Poço: Reflexões sobre Experiências de Liberdade* (*Waters from my Well – Reflections on Experiences of Liberation*, 2005a), Gebara narrates her life against the backdrop of a self-reflection about *liberdade* (freedom). Gebara's book is not only an opportunity to inspire Christian women who seek equality in public and private spaces to step forward, but it is also a treatise on how the idea of *liberdade* has shaped Gebara's intellectual work. Gebara was born in 1944 and had only female siblings. She grew up in a middle-class family in São Paulo and attended Catholic schools. Her parents were first generation Lebanese immigrants to Brazil. Through the 1950s and 1960s, women were told from an early age about their gendered roles, about their places in the home as well as how the men—father, brother, husband—within their lives occupied a central place. In the 1960s the rise of the

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<sup>5</sup> My own translation from the original in Portuguese.

feminist movement was bringing new consciousness to North America and Europe, but in Brazil and in most Latin American countries military dictatorships blocked these social movements entrance into society. People's concerns were rather about liberation and, at the same time, to find ways to become economically independent. Gebara's family was not different, as immigrants who moved to Brazil dreaming for a better economic life. Gebara's (2005a: 89) mother understood freedom through material goods. For her to be independent meant to have enough to be financially stable. Gebara on the other hand wanted the freedom that she saw in men's lives. She wanted *as a woman* to make her own decisions and to think for herself. She thought that through education she would be free from the limiting social roles imposed on women. The family dynamic in Gebara's house, which was shaped by a patriarchal culture, did not open up a space for autonomy or to pursue her idea of freedom. It was expected from her to be wed and bear many children (Gebara, 2005a: 65). Her wishes of going to university or leaving the home were not entertained by her parents. This is not to say that Gebara's parents did not want their daughters to study, but it would be better if the girls could find a husband who looked after their well-being.

Gebara's own relationship with her mother was interrelated with her relationship with Rica, the domestic worker at Gebara's parents' house. Rica was present in Gebara's life since infancy to adulthood. She was a Catholic devotee with black-African origins (Gebara, 2005a: 81-83). Similar to Gebara's family trajectory, Rica came to São Paulo searching for a better life. Both Gebara's mother and Rica had much in common, but the socio-cultural parameters would not allow to them to have an egalitarian relationship. Gebara tells how Rica's presence in her family impacted her life (Gebara, 2005a: 89). "Rica woke inside me the desire to search for freedom, but a freedom according to my own understanding and to fight for the liberation of others" (*ibid.*). Rica never married, rooted in her own religiosity she decided to rather devote herself to God, Jesus and the Virgin Mary. Rica's life history and experiences represented all the beauty, according to Gebara, of the mixing between races—which is found throughout the whole of Brazil. The inter-relationships of this immigrant, middle-class family and Rica illuminate connections between gender, race and class. Gebara became aware of how certain embodied contexts impact one's worldview as well as scholarship. It is not purely a coincidence that Gebara's theological scholarship has been centred on issues of liberation from imprisoned gender roles and race, intertwined with economic hardship.

In an interview given to Argentinean journalist Mariana Carbajal (*Adital*, 2012), Gebara tells that she decided to become a nun due to her search for freedom “...in 1960, I began studying philosophy and at university I met some Catholic nuns who were very political and extremely involved with the struggle for liberation and against poverty. I began seeing that as an alternative life style for me. It was not very clear, but it seemed a better life, with more freedom than having a husband and a traditional family life” (*Adital*, 2012). Religious life started to represent a door to freedom. Gebara could break out of her family’s cultural expectations, where a women’s place was in the home.

When Gebara was only eighteen years old she began studying philosophy and entered the public and intellectual space dominated by men. She started teaching philosophy at a public college while also working as a secretary. Joseph Comblin, a progressive liberation theologian and Belgian priest living in Brazil, became an influential figure in Gebara’s learning process. Comblin was an activist and a scholar. As a lecturer he transmitted to Gebara the importance of critically thinking about the injustices endured by the poor. Gebara admired Comblin’s revolutionary ways of thinking, saying, “he always seemed a free thinker and I admired his life choices and thinking” (Gebara, 2005a: 66). Comblin helped her find her way to study theology for two years at Louvain University in Belgium. In the absence of female role models Gebara was forced to carve out her own path to become a critical thinker.

After concluding her degree in philosophy in São Paulo, at twenty-two years of age, Gebara entered religious life. Those were times of change in the Catholic Church, just after Vatican II, when the churches were being invited to *aggiornarse*.<sup>66</sup> In 1971 she went to Louvain, Belgium to study theology. It was in 1973, while she was still studying in Belgium, that she was invited to return to Brazil for three months in order to replace Comblin, who had been exiled due to his critical theological views (Gebara, 2005a: 69). From Belgium back to Brazil, Gebara returned during the sprouting of the liberation theology movement. She began teaching theology and philosophy at ITER (Institute of Theology in Recife), being the only female theologian and soon to become vice-director (Gebara, 2005a: 69). Under the direction of Don Hélder Câmara, another pioneering liberation theologian, this progressive Catholic institute was one of the leading ecumenical schools employing the liberationist discourse in Latin America. ITER was located in one of the most impoverished parts of Recife, largely populated by black-African

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<sup>66</sup> From Italian *aggiornarse*, meaning to transform, to update.

descendants. Culturally and religiously, this particular demographic have amounted to a great deal of hybridization between Christianity and African religious traditions. In collaboration with Câmera's, Gebara deeply contributed to the development of liberation theology and the Christian Base Communities (CBCs). She was in charge of the theological foundations of the community development projects that were focused on promoting social changes through educational programs. For Gebara (2005a: 68-69) working as an educator became a form of experiencing freedom. The joy that she felt witnessing change and the transformative knowledge production that took place among her students was a daily confirmation of being on the path of freedom. Through teaching, Gebara also saw opportunities to learn from the experiences of those she educated. Gebara taught at ITER for seventeen years until it was closed by the Vatican in 1989. The institute played a central role in promoting the view that religious leaders should live in the midst of the poor, instead of in ascetic cloistered institutions. Though Gebara initially went back to Brazil intending to stay for three months, she continues to live in the state of Pernambuco today, and for more than twenty years in *Camaragibe*, one of the poorest suburbs on the periphery of Recife.

ITER was closed in large part due to the resurgence of conservative Catholicism, which took exception to the more progressive liberation theology movement. During that time, Gebara was already a key figure within liberation theology, focusing on integrating poor women's experiences into her liberationist hermeneutics. Although, not yet self-defined as a feminist her ground breaking *Maria, Mãe de Deus e Mãe dos Pobres* (1987), published in English as *Mary Mother of God, Mother of the Poor* (1989) and co-authored with Maria Clara Bingemer, proposed a Marian liberation theology that was deeply sensitive towards women's suffering and qualitative discrimination. Gebara and Bingemer challenged the existing liberationist hermeneutics to re-adjust their views around social justice and egalitarianism in light of the evident levels of women's oppression. Gebara and Bingemer's Marian liberationist work was grounded in an alternative Christian, and I would say feminist, anthropology, which still inform Gebara's thinking. The closing of the institute, however, impacted radically Gebara's role as an educator within the Catholic institution as well as her own theological and philosophical viewpoints (2005a: 71). Gebara was disappointed with the Church's resistance to transformation. She was increasingly uncomfortable with liberationist discourse because it was ignorant of domestic injustices. These issues impacted Gebara's theology, though perhaps in the opposite



way that many expected. Without the institutional support of ITER, Gebara continued to offer spiritual support to the community in Camaragibe. She became more and more involved with facilitating workshops and giving lectures. Today she is invited to speak throughout Latin America and abroad. Through a feminist theology she seeks to voice the liberationist's voice through groups (mostly women's groups), seminars, workshops and conferences. The Church closed the door that Gebara once saw as part of the path to freedom, however other doors were opened. Among religious communities leadership roles are often given to those upon whom a clerical status has been granted. Leadership roles are associated with those whose regular duty is to preach, like the priest in the Sunday mass or the pastor's sermon. Gebara does not have any of those titles and neither does she desire them or see the need for them in order to follow her vocation (see Gebara, 2005a). However, it would not be wrong to say that her whole way of life has been a response to her religious vocation. What is religious vocation if not the response to God's calling? According to Rosemary Skinner Keller (2006) this is exactly the meaning of a religious vocation: "Vocation means the way a person lives the whole of her or his life as a response to God or a Divine Being, not just the kind of work one does or the way she or he may do it" (Keller, R.S., 2006: 71). Gebara has carried out her work as a spiritual counsellor, a preacher, a teacher, an instructor, and a theologian. Her vocational life and not only her scholarship have defied the Catholic Church's patriarchal theological anthropology which maintain that only men are suited to represent God's work and image on this earth.

From an early age Gebara would notice that popular forms of religiosity were interconnected with a desire to feel protected. As a scholar Gebara analysed this form of religiosity as an appeasement of suffering. Prayers and devotion became the channels through which the population felt heard and in certain ways protected from oppression. Gebara was not a regular nun; she was never attached to a Saint. She appeared more interested in listening to people's real life stories of sacrifice than about the Saints' death and life. The step to become a liberation theologian seemed to be coherent with Gebara's life pattern. Her search to be a free-thinker and to help the marginalised intersected with the liberationist's aims.

Gebara was also not a usual liberation theologian. She learned about the struggle and the liberationist hermeneutics from and with many leading male liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez, Don Helder Câmara and Joseph Comblin. But as a woman she began to notice how women's suffering were subtly ignored by her teachers and colleagues. The

theological perspective voiced by Ivone Gebara is one that has navigated polemical religious debates. Yet, her trajectory also entailed a gradual process of restructuring and refining a feminist hermeneutic. Crucial to how this feminist hermeneutic took shape were the many contexts and relationships at play. These included colonial and postcolonial social dynamics, political and militant polemics, patriarchal religious and economic cultures, First-Third World relationships and cross-cultural relationships, gender and intimate relationships, and male-female theologian relationships, among others. These contexts and relationships informed the development and creation of theologies of liberation. Gebara was one of the first liberation theologians to question liberation theology's critical analysis of the poor and to point out that its hermeneutic was becoming obsolete and attached to a specific time.

Nonetheless, during the 1970s, the belief in a God of justice that sided with the poor was part of the liberationist discourse and as such Gebara envisioned that bringing these ideals to the population was one of the greatest contributions of the church to the people (Gebara, 2005a: 114). Intellectually she supported the political struggle for land similarly to other liberation theologians: "My role was to convince the people that the struggle for the land, for housing and for dignifying living, were part of God's project to humanity" (*ibid.*).<sup>7</sup> What distinguished Gebara from other liberation theologians was her way of being open to continued and varied ways of learning. Her openness and genuine interest in forms of learning and teaching that highlighted the human ability to learn how to theologize from both listening to and observing daily lived experiences, exposed once more how objective knowledge production is informed by scholars' subjective modes of engagement. Gebara worked for a liberationist praxis that allowed the individual to make connections with daily experiences by exercising independent thinking and self-analysis. For her, the theological task ought to teach people about ethical and social responsibility through a critical engagement with pre-defined religious concepts. This praxis is a pattern in Gebara's trajectory. Her thinking is on-the-move as it is grounded in the changing needs of the marginalized in her own context, and by her engagement and dialoguing with global realities. Gebara's transforming theology illustrates an embodied theory that mediates the *agora* (now, at this moment) of the people. The following stories demonstrate Gebara's on-the-move thinking in order to exemplify her behavioural learning and ability to make broader conceptual connections.

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<sup>7</sup> My own translation from Portuguese.

During the 1970s, Gebara (2005a: 114-115) went to support a health team in the *sertão pernambucano* (the driest regions in Pernambuco, in the North of Brazil). She accompanied a *parteira* (midwife) to help a young woman give birth. In an extremely poor environment, Gebara held the pregnant woman's hand during labour. Gebara reported that while witnessing the young woman's pain and suffering, she offered words of encouragement, while empathizing with that experience. In Gebara's words, "I felt as if I had already undergone something like that" (2005a: 114). Although, being a nun, Gebara never birthed a child. Yet through this process of witnessing and sharing she observed that her own body, corporeally, could empathise with what the young woman went through. In his gratitude, the new father presented Gebara and the *parteira* with a chicken and a bottle of Coca-Cola. The shared energy and the fulfilment of that experience led Gebara to reflect on the joy of being alive as not necessarily and only related to utilitarian actions. She connected this joy with her search for freedom, the meaning in being alive can also be found beyond the struggle of overcoming people's immediate needs. It could come from observing and sharing personal and historic moments. Likely, this type of experience informed Gebara's teachings on salvation. Like most liberation theologians, Gebara taught that salvation starts now, in this life. However, unlike most male liberation theologians, she articulated that salvation is for the present (Gebara, 1986: 5-14; 1988; 258-272). Therefore, the hope for a better life should be focused on this earth, instead of a future earth. The struggle to overcome people's immediate needs is not only to dignify their lives on this earth, while the new earth does not arrive, but rather to dignify people's lives on this earth because this is the only earth where history and interrelated lived experiences are shared and built into a better future.

Here, I want to draw attention to an experience which opened Gebara's eyes to the silent injustices lived by women in Latin America. From 1978 to 1980 Gebara (2005a: 122-123) worked with a group of industrial labourers who were involved in the formation process of a young priest. She provided theological training for them in home meetings. During the meetings, Gebara noticed that the wife of the homeowner was always busy preparing coffee and bringing fruits to the participants. Though Gebara frequently offered this woman to join in the meetings, she always declined. One Sunday Gebara decided to visit this woman and find out her reasons for not partaking in the meetings. After the woman had explained her reasons, Gebara related how shocked she was with what the woman had said. The woman bluntly explained that she did not understand what was discussed during the meetings: "this is not a language of my world and

you Miss [Gebara] speak like a man” (2005a: 122). Gebara responded by explaining that she was a woman, not a man, and so she did not understand the woman’s point. The woman responded by explaining that Gebara only spoke about the male reality of the industrial labourers, about their claims, their needs for a better salary and their political struggles. “I never heard you speaking about our children, about women, and about how much they struggle to feed their children... You don’t speak about the women industrial labourers’ difficult life conditions, about their particular struggles during work hours when having their menstrual cycle or when they have to breast feed and work at the same time. You never speak about our sexuality and submission to men. You don’t speak about our daily reality” (2005a: 122-123).<sup>8</sup> Gebara credits this experience for helping her understand how her theological discourse, though socially engaged, was profoundly alienated from many women’s everyday realities, and from her own reality as a woman. It was then that her eyes were opened to the fact that the oppression that women undergo daily was never mentioned in the ecclesiastic middle: “I began seeing what I never saw before, the female body, my own female body is a space of social and cultural oppression” (2005a: 123).<sup>9</sup>

These experiences intimately reveal how Gebara, although a liberation theologian, a nun and woman, was not in tune with the daily realities of the poor women or the levels of cultural oppression that poor mothers, married or single, endured. It is possible that as a nun Gebara, and originally from a middle-class family, was not exposed to the everyday grind of working-class women in her own life, or even though she may have been exposed to it, she was not yet aware of their oppressive nature. This encounter with a poor woman who clearly articulated specific and located issues for women, allowed Gebara to realize her own imbrications within the power structure, a power structure that naturalized male experience. As a nun, not being part of a marital relationship, nor being a mother, Gebara was in some sense given a form of “male privilege”—rendering a layer of female experience invisible and apolitical. The moment when Gebara recorded the words of that woman was also implicitly a moment of recognition of her own enmeshment in a power structure that renders women invisible. From that moment, she took women’s invisibility as a theological and existential challenge. This in turn showed Gebara’s own ability to be receptive and inclusive—to allow herself to be existentially and intellectually impacted by the experiences of other women, and moreover, to recognize and act on a discursive

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<sup>8</sup> My own translation.

<sup>9</sup> My own translation.

aporia. The paradoxes exposed by Gebara's diverse experiences illuminated other contexts where women might not be aware of their own oppressive reality or of the reality of those around them. More importantly, it represented how these in-between spaces were beneficial in helping Gebara and other feminist theologians to move forward. To think about theology from those spaces helped Gebara to progress into a new phase, her feminist liberation theology during the 1980s.

The combination of Gebara's, at times, arbitrary, experiences with the socio-economic analysis adopted by liberation theology was, according to Gebara, not sufficient to adequately engage in the liberation of the oppressed from cultural injustices and despair (Gebara, 2005a: 131). Systems of domination was deeply rooted in peoples' anthropological and cosmological understandings. Realising the deep-rooted nature of this reality, during the 1980s, Gebara began seeking for and developing alternative theories and ways of thinking that were not grounded in hierarchical forms of dualism. She started participating and organising feminist groups in Recife after reading national and international feminist scholars. Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father* (1973) and several works by Rosemary R. Ruether, Dorothe Sölle and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza informed Gebara's path in making the connections between economic and material productions and symbolic-cultural reproductions, especially of gender within theology (Gebara, 2005a: 132). In doing so, Gebara dared to challenge the polarization between Global North and South theological works. Gebara also dared to challenge the polarization between Global North and South intellectual works. She was innovative and yet her thirsts for knowledge did not lead her to unquestioningly absorb these new feminist perspectives and theories. She integrated new feminist perspectives into her own work by way of translating it according to her own social and cultural context. Through a dialogue and based on local and international feminist insight, as well as Gebara's own experiences, a hybrid or alternative feminist liberation religious anthropology emerged. Gebara challenged liberation theologians to re-think tradition via a progressive cross-cultural and interreligious dialogue, locally and globally.

One of Gebara's main contributions to the liberationist discourse is that she demonstrated how to combine socio-economic and cultural analysis into liberation theology. This combined analysis is what Gebara has called feminist liberation theology and constitutes her hermeneutical lens. In Latin America, Gebara was one of the liberation theologians to problematize the different forms of oppression emanating from a dualistic and hierarchical theological anthropology, discussed at length in her book *As Incômodas Filhas de Eva na Igreja da América*

*Latina* (*The Stubborn Daughters of Eve in the Latin American Church*, 1989b). Through exploring women's domestic life, Gebara rendered visible a reality that up to that time had been overlooked by liberation theologians, namely, the hierarchical binary models of private and public spheres on which Latin American society was constructed. Gebara charged liberation theologians with not dealing sufficiently with the multiplicitous forms of oppression that poor women undergo daily within the domestic sphere. Through her heightened attention to women's experiences, Gebara exposed the androcentric epistemology of liberation theology, and shifted the focus to include liberation for all. Gebara's ground-breaking "Option for the Poor as an Option for Poor Women" (1987) was only the beginning of her gender analysis, but also a strong invitation to liberation theologians to expand their understanding of the "poor" as a category:

[T]he word "poor" even though it refers primarily to a social group deprived of material goods, can be expanded to include an impoverished culture, voiceless minorities without rights, groups seeking elementary recognition in society. Women are included in this expansion of the term poor. This does not in any way detract from the fundamental question of class struggle in Latin America or mean that we have lost sight of the problem of strikers, or those men, women and children in all kinds of want. It is merely to look at one particular aspect of the problem of the oppressed. (Gebara, 1987: 142-143)

During the 1990s the trajectories of Latin American liberation theology and feminist liberation theology resulted in disagreements on core issues, particularly on the means and methods needed to achieve liberation. Feminist awareness took deep roots among women liberation theologians while male liberation theologians, in general, struggled to incorporate the new knowledge proposed by feminists. Gebara's hermeneutical lens, which encapsulated women's domestic life and experiences, led her to think concretely about issues such as decriminalization and legalization of abortion, birth control, sexual pleasure and women's dignity. This, in turn, also led her "to deconstruct and reconstruct thoughts about God and the traditional dogma of the Roman Catholic Church" (Gebara, 1997a: 3).

Gebara's liberationist views around sexuality and women's rights drew more attention to her arguments than what I imagine was expected or desired by her. In 1995, Ivone Gebara received international notoriety for being silenced by the Vatican and sent to two years of

theological re-education in Belgium. Commenting on this event, the *National Catholic Reporter* ran the heading: “Ivone Gebara Must Be Doing Something Right”. According to the *National Catholic Reporter* one of the main reasons for the Vatican’s decision to silence her was due to an interview that Gebara gave to the weekly Brazilian national magazine, *Veja* (See), in 1993. In this interview, Gebara expressed publicly, for the first time, her views related to abortion. She was the first liberation theologian—and still is one of the few—to claim that abortion is not necessarily a sin. Recounting the reality of poor women throughout the Brazilian slums, Gebara argued that any woman that is not emotionally or psychologically prepared to bear a child should have the right to end her pregnancy (*Veja*, 1993: 7).

Gebara’s position became a landmark within liberation theologies. The debate on abortion opened up a new discourse on women’s sexuality and identity within the feminist liberation theology. Traditional views of what constitute the sacred as well as certain paradoxes of patriarchal Christian anthropology were challenged. For example, Gebara highlighted the contradictions in viewing abortion as an aberration against God when birth in the contexts of poverty in the urban centres of Brazil, often resulted in the worsening of life conditions for mothers and children, increased strain on natural resources due to population pressures, and decreased access to portable water. Gebara raised pertinent questions, such as: ‘How can abortion not be legalized in a country which offers little means for poor women to avoid pregnancy?’ and ‘How can women deal with a new born child when they themselves are malnourished and, in several cases, without a prospect for income?’ Gebara also pointed out the lack of education, information and health facilities as having harmful consequences for poor women. Furthermore, Gebara critically addressed the patriarchal foundations of the Catholic tradition and its prevalent androcentrism. She enquired, ‘How can people decide on matters regarding women’s bodies without listening to women’s opinions, experiences and desires?’ In the interview (*Veja*, 1993), Gebara made it a national issue that the “option for the poor” advocated by liberation theology should now also include women’s decision-making over their own bodies. Her views directly contradicted the official position of the Roman Catholic Church and as a result Gebara was accused of having a naïve (read: dangerous) theological perspective. For this reason she was silenced and sent to exile.

Before Gebara was silenced by the Vatican, numerous meetings with the President of the Conference of Bishops of Brazil followed and a public retraction was required from Gebara, who

promptly rejected the demand (Gebara, 2005a: 151). The bishop from Recife then forwarded the case to the Vatican's Congregation of the Doctrine and Faith, which resulted in the start of an extensive review of Gebara's theological writings, interviews and courses.

Gebara's exile and theological re-education likely had the opposite effect intended by the Vatican as they did not succeed in closing the door on the issues Gebara had brought to the forefront, nor could the Vatican silence all the feminist theologians that took notice of Gebara's affront to the church's authority. Gebara's work became influential among a variety of Latin American feminist theologians. Her anthropology served as new ground for scholars who were seeking an alternative theological framework, such as Mexican feminist theologian María Pilar Aquino (see 2002 [1993]), Mexican biblical scholar Elsa Tamez (1995; 1996), Brazilian ecofeminist Sandra Duarte (see 1999), Brazilian queer theologian Mario Ribas (see 2009 [2006]) and American economist and theologian Maylin Biggadike (2010). Gebara's theological views inspired and informed feminist theologians in the Global South and North (see Ruether, 1996; 1998; 2005; Eaton, 2001; 2003; 2005), a markedly interesting shift pertaining to the power relations of knowledge production.

Following her period of theological re-education, where Gebara obtained her second doctoral degree, Gebara returned to Brazil and continued her critique of the androcentric basis of the Christian traditional worldview, undeterred by the actions taken against her by the Vatican. She became active in writing and speaking about key elements of the Christian tradition, but now also incorporating an ecofeminist perspective. Gebara was one of the main founders of the largest ecofeminist magazine and network in the Global South, *Con-Spirando*, based in Santiago, Chile.<sup>10</sup> In "The Con-Spirando Women's Collective: Globalization from Below?" founding member and ecofeminist theologian Judith Ress (2003: 147-162) narrates how Gebara's insights and rationale encouraged, inspired and motivated this network during its early years. The collective *Con-spirando* has been a great contribution in promoting cross-cultural exchange among women situated in the Global South, as well as fostering dialogue between these women and feminist liberation theologians in the Global North.

After concluding her theological re-education and returning to Brazil, the conflictuous relationship between Gebara and the Vatican did not come to an end. The Vatican continued monitoring Gebara's teachings and writings, leading once more to reprimands by the Vatican.

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<sup>10</sup> For more information see <http://www.conspirando.cl/>



Despite pressure and reprimands, Gebara has consistently pursued reform with regard to the theological task. Northern ecofeminists, such as Heather Eaton (2005) and Rosemary R. Ruether (2005), have identified Gebara as the leading scholar in developing a Latin American ecofeminist perspective. However, the uniqueness of Gebara's ecofeminist proposal rests upon a position of the non-rejection of Christianity, the opposite view to that adopted by many feminists and spiritual ecofeminists in the Global North. Gebara has by her own choice remained a sister of Our Lady, Canonesses of St. Augustine. Although, historically Christianity is the religion of the colonizers, it is Gebara's liberationist praxis to transform the theological discourse from within. In addition, Gebara, although a Catholic nun, produces theology by drawing on alternative sources found outside of the ambit of the Christian tradition. More specifically, her inspiration comes from women's experiences of reality, a reality that compounds gender discrimination in addition to the already prevalent racial and class oppression. In this view, Gebara is a revolutionary who stands up against any sort of Christian theological authoritarianism and, as such, she has followed her vocational career according to the theological perspective that God has called the whole human race to seek justice and freedom to all living beings (Gebara, 2005a). Gebara is indirectly re-creating alternative forms of liberationist praxis.

### ***Sub-Chapter Conclusion***

Gebara's life and work demonstrates how self-reflective and fluid exchange of intellectual, cultural and empirical knowledge inspires methodological transformation. Gebara's methodology has continuously worked to re-adjust her own worldview and that of other feminist theologians. I argue that Gebara's feminist and ecofeminist perspectives are a result of her on-the-move liberationist methodology. From the conflicting in-between spaces, she has developed ways to transform and reimagine theology accordingly to new social and ecological challenges.

Through her scholarship Gebara has demonstrated what she understands to be the human vocation to freedom. Gebara's career has been an intersection between forms of resistance, illustrated by her fight for women's right to make decisions over their own body, and her theological arguments against hierarchical domination. In approaching Gebara's religious career and scholarship, it is obvious how integrated they are. Her scholarship is her religious career. Together they represent Gebara's unrelentingly response to God's calling to seek justice for all living beings. Perhaps without her calling, Gebara would not have developed her transforming

liberationist proposal. Nevertheless, it is from this conscious relationship with the divine that she has inspired individuals to continue to search for a more egalitarian and purposeful religious ethics than previously conceived.

The religious life allowed Gebara to continue learning and achieve the freedom she sought. Perhaps many women from her time also desired to find purpose and achievement by stepping outside the domestic sphere. It was through the religious life that Gebara boldly stepped into the public domain. At that time she was unaware of the patriarchal theology underlining the Catholic institutions. She had not yet made the connection that the price for her freedom would be to challenge the boundaries put up by the theological walls restricting women's liberation. Even when she was silent she was still speaking through all the women that voiced her thinking locally and globally. The Vatican closed several doors on her, but she never left the Church. Carbajal asked Gebara why she continued to stay within the Church. Her answer was:

To leave the Church would also be to leave marginalized women, those who suffer the most, they are all Christians. I believe that feminists have not yet performed enough investigations about the domination of religion within the popular sphere. Religion has in certain forms provided comfort and at the same time oppressed women. I cannot be a feminist and ignore the religious worldview of those marginalized women. (*Adital*, 2012)<sup>11</sup>

Independently of women's religious orientation, Gebara believes that religion(s) continue to instigate various forms of domination over women's bodies. In Latin America, the church wields significant power over people's lives and the shaping of culture. For this reason, Gebara believes that social and religious change are intrinsically connected. To leave the Church would only contradict her theological position. Consequently, her decision to remain within the ambit of the Church has coherently followed her liberationist feminist thinking, and can be illustrated through her period of theological re-education. Ivone Gebara's biography is indeed a glimpse of Latin America's history. Her biography is an embodied history of resistance. Gebara has resisted traditional social gender mores and patriarchal theology. In resisting, Gebara forged a nonconventional religious career that enabled her to continue searching for freedom in both public and private spheres of life. It is in this light that I propose to learn from Gebara's feminist

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<sup>11</sup> My own translation from the original in Portuguese.

anthropological proposal and ecofeminist perspective in ways that strengthens the political goals of ecofeminism within different socio-cultural contexts across the globe.

#### **1.4 Chapter Outline**

Chapter one, “Contextualizing the Theology of Ivone Gebara”, introduces the work developed by Ivone Gebara in the context of the emerging global ecofeminist discourse. By examining the historical contours of ecofeminism, I emphasise the dynamic and fluid nature of this movement. Focusing on points of convergence and divergence among ecofeminist discourses, I foreground Ivone Gebara as an important thinker whose ideas and perspectives might act as a possible bridge to enhance global exchanges of feminist theological and ecological perspectives. I discuss Gebara’s scholarly and religious trajectory in order to illustrate the multiple processes and experiences that have influenced her vocational “on-the-move” theological praxis. Chapter one also engages the need to increasingly develop an ecofeminist political praxis. I argue that Gebara’s body of work—as reflective of postcolonial encounters and negotiations—engenders productive in-between spaces that hold the potential to inspire ecofeminist theologians’ political activism.

Chapter two, “The Contours of Global Ecofeminism”, explores global ecofeminist discourses and their different approaches in reconfiguring the current relationships between humans and nature. Chapter two revisits issues initially raised by Ruether (1996) and Eaton (2001) concerning the implications of an ecofeminist tendency to over-emphasise theory. The call to develop a political ecofeminist theology that may bridge the gap between scholarship and practice, I argue, possibly finds a response through the ecofeminist theologies emerging from the Global South, particularly in Latin America. Conversely, the principal aim in this chapter is to foreground the importance of an integrated and continuous North and South ecofeminist dialogical dynamic.

Chapter three, “A History of Resistance”, engages the Latin American context by examining the pressures of colonialism, empire and neoliberalism through a postcolonial analytical lens. Chapter three focuses on the developments and adjustments of Gebara’s liberationist theology. In particular, I explore Gebara’s praxis-oriented methodology, which clearly demonstrates how her commitment to liberating the poor rooted her methodological ground in the *agora* (now, immediate). In synthesizing Gebara’s intellectual trajectory and

praxis-oriented methodology, chapter three concludes by highlighting the ways in which Gebara's theological compass, the 'immediate context of oppression', consolidates a political ecofeminist praxis through a theology that fosters critical thinking.

Chapter four, "A New Anthropology," engages Gebara's feminist theological anthropology and the reasons for the development of a Marian liberation theological proposal, which signals a shift in her hermeneutical method and approach. In particular, I focus on Gebara's deconstruction of patriarchal anthropology and dualistic gender constructions. Chapter five, "Ecofeminist Theology from the In-Between Spaces", presents an affirmative and constructive assessment of Gebara's ecofeminist theological work. Gebara's methodological and anthropological insights and her engagement with interreligious thought, spirituality and practice, contribute productively to the further development of ecological ethics in global ecofeminist religious discourses. Gebara's ecofeminist discourse functions as a religious practice that is primarily interested in social justice for the most vulnerable groups in society. As such, Gebara's work challenges scholars to overcome hierarchical-dualistic patterns of thought and practice so that the restructuring of just relationships between humans, and between humans and nature can take place. Chapter six, "Conclusion: Gebara and Ecofeminist Horizons" positions Gebara's praxis-oriented methodology and theological proposal as an invitation to establish a dynamic dialogue that may serve to reduce the gap between practice and theology within the religious ecofeminist discourses from the North and South respectively. In particular, it is Gebara's focus on the immediate reality and the various forms of oppression therein, which might offer diversely situated ecofeminists a rich and nuanced tapestry for ecofeminist analysis.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE CONTOURS OF GLOBAL ECOFEMINISM

#### Introduction

The rise of the ecofeminist movement in the 1970s brought about a new consciousness pertaining to the kinds of feminist analysis that could foster ecological awareness and relatedly, social and political change. Inspired by this emerging political and ecological discourse, global feminist theologians also began transforming their theological and anthropological perspectives to attend the immediate contexts of oppression experienced by women and children globally. New forms of contextual wisdom emerged from all corners of the world, contributing to the development of a global ecofeminist movement. As such, ecofeminism as a discourse is the result of local ecological concerns and challenges together with feminist commitments to social and ecological justice. The ecofeminist movement, which initially arose in the Global North and subsequently spread to the Global South, has continuously undergone a process of transformation and integration of new perspectives. Throughout this chapter I illustrate how an increasingly focus on location and situatedness, in particular, has become central to the global ecofeminist movement while also compatible with feminist liberation theology. A special attention is given to the global ecofeminist religious discourse, particularly Christianity. I present this perspective in order to discuss the possibilities of a shared ecofeminist intersectional analysis in an increasingly globalized world.

In “Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections,” ecofeminist philosopher Karen Warren (1987) argued that if feminists were to take on ecological issues, a new notion of what it means to be human would have to emerge. Warren explained that it is not enough to have the ecological crisis as an addendum to feminist’s concerns. In order to address the women-nature critique, as well as to articulate solutions to their mutual forms of oppression, an alternative epistemology and anthropology would have to emerge (Warren, 1987: 4). Starting from the presupposition that all ecofeminist analysis must encapsulate the basic claims to which ecofeminism is committed, four basic tenets arose: “(i) there are important connections between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature; (ii) understanding the nature of these connections is necessary to any adequate understanding of the oppression of women and the

oppression of nature; (iii) feminist theory and practice must include an ecological perspective; and (iv) solutions to ecological problems must include a feminist perspective” (Warren, 1987: 4-5). In this way, Warren proposes that the ecofeminist discourse requires its own paradigm of inquiry from which issues were to be addressed (Warren, 1994: 2).

There are several publications which map the development of ecofeminism. In particular, Eaton’s *Introduction to Ecofeminist Theology* (2005) provides a detailed overview of the emergence of the movement and analysis of the contributions of feminists and activists positioned in the Global North and South. Rosemary R. Ruether’s “Ecofeminist Philosophy, Theology, and Ethics: A Comparative View” (2007a) introduces ecofeminist concepts and critique in a clear and concise fashion. Pioneering ecofeminist Charlene Spretnak’s “Ecofeminism: Our Roots and Flowering” (1990) narrates the ecofeminist historical development from the perspective of those engaged with earth-based spiritualities. Finally, Warren’s “Ecofeminism and Ecology: Making Connections” (1987) critically analyses diverse feminist perspectives highlighting both their contributions and weakness to the development of ecofeminism.

In this chapter, I approach the emergence of ecofeminist theory and its central point of discussion: the connections between the oppression of women and nature. The activism, social movements and national/international conferences that have been essential to the construction of the ecological-feminist connections will be invoked without necessarily specifying the works of those who employ ecofeminist perspectives without being aware of it, from those who write and teach about ecofeminism without claiming to be ecofeminists, and of course those who self-identify as ecofeminists and actively advocate ecofeminism as a way to better understand this globalized world. I believe that a broad approach will reveal the overlapping of the many dimensions of analyses and critique of the women-nature connection surfacing in the Global North and South.

This chapter is divided into six sections. In the first section, I examine some of the real life experiences of women that inspired the early development of an ecofeminist perspective in the Global North and South. These women’s life stories rendered visible the critical linkages between the destruction of the planet and the pervasive challenges to women’s health and well-being. The second section is a progression from the first. Here, I discuss the link between the oppression towards women and nature at the material level forged by those activists and scholars

working at the intersection of gender, poverty and development in the axis of the Global North and South. The third section introduces the early developments of the academic conceptualization of ecofeminism. In the fourth section, I discuss the contours of ecofeminism's basic tenets within the intersection of feminism, ecology and religion. The fifth section looks at some of the ways that ecofeminist theory have influenced, transformed and opened the space for emerging ecofeminist theologies. Lastly, I re-open the discussion on ways to advance nascent ecofeminist political praxis. This chapter concludes with a reflection on Heather Eaton's proposal of developing an ecofeminist political praxis in dialogue with liberation theologies. Ivone Gebara's feminist liberation theology and ecofeminist perspective is positioned at the centre of this debate.

## **2.1 Ecofeminist Development: A Historical Overview**

To start a reflection on the historical development of ecofeminism in light of Heather Eaton's "At the Intersection of Ecofeminism and Religion: Directions for Considerations" (2001) contributes to understanding the many intersecting paths that have amalgamated into the ecofeminist discourse. Simultaneously, it is important to clarify that ecofeminism signifies a varied range of ecological and feminist commitments (2001: 76). Thus, the development of ecofeminist perspectives in different parts of the world illustrate that "ecofeminism is a term that now shelters hosts of different links between...women and the natural world" (Eaton, 2005: 3). The growing awareness of multiple forms of oppression experienced by women globally, and the related forms of resistance, have been investigated and manifested through "critical analyses, political actions, historical research, intuitions and ideals" (Eaton, 2005: 2-3), making it impossible to explain what ecofeminism is via a simple categorization.

### ***The Intersections between Social Activist Movements and Feminist-Ecological Thinking***

Ecofeminism as an activist approach and as a theory of analysis started to take shape from Françoise d'Eaubonne's call to women to take charge of an "ecological revolution to save the planet" (Eaton, 2005: 3). From the 1980s a number of scholarly publications, in which the historical development of ecofeminism is narrated, reveal how ecofeminist analyses has its early roots within the political and activist movements of anti-war, anti-racism and women's liberation

movements in Europe and North America.<sup>12</sup> Subsequently, the different environmental issues that women face in the North and the South provided a coherent critique of the existing “model of development based upon scientific knowledge, industrial technology and the capitalist market economy” (Mellor, 1997: 25). In the Global North the rise of social consciousness, during the 1960s and 1970s, increased women’s campaigns for health and economic well-being allied with environmental movements (Eaton, 2005: 12). In the Global South the campaigns for health and economic well-being have been part of their postcolonial histories and have always been allied with ecological concerns. This is to say that in the Global South ecological concerns have taken a different shape due to interconnections with the campaigns fighting for the people’s right to survive. Survival in the Global South means to have basic needs supplied, such as clean water for drinking, preservation of the woods for cooking and game to feed families. Within the Global South and North, emerging non-governmental groups identified some of the ways in which ecological degradation impacted women and children’s health. While these groups did not explicitly use an ecofeminist framework in their work, they contributed important data and insights on the ecological and gender-related challenges faced by women in relation to different socio-economic realities.

### *The Connections between Women and Nature in the Global North*

It is well known that the roles that women have played in social and political movements have often been marginalised or hidden in normative historical narratives. In the same way, women’s scholarly work on ecology was initially ignored or denigrated to ‘a woman’s issue’. Certainly, the gender binaries pervading Western traditional philosophy contributed to discrediting women’s ecological warnings. For example, history has credited German Ernst Haeckel with naming the subject of ecology in 1873. Whereas the contribution of his contemporary, American educationalist and ecologist Ellen Swallow, is generally ignored in spite of the fact that she has at least an equal claim to the founding of the discipline of ecology (Mellor, 1997: 14). As a professor in sanitary chemistry and nutrition, Swallow envisioned “*oekology*” as a science where “industrial health, water and air quality, transportation, and nutrition” were matters of concern for the whole community (Merchant, 1996: 139). For Swallow, ecological science should play a

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<sup>12</sup> For work on the link between women’s health and ecological issues, see Merchant’s *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (1996: 139-166). Merchant provides an extensive chronological history of conferences and activist initiatives that served as a foundation for the ecofeminist movement within the United States and internationally.



fundamental and instructive role in the economics of the home. She dedicated her research to conceptualising and establishing ecological principles related to the earth and the home, emphasizing life-sustaining concepts such as clean air and water. According to Merchant, Swallow aimed to popularizing the issue of water and air pollution caused by the growth of factories, and criticized the selfish use of technology that resulted in squandered the heritage of future generations (Merchant, 1996: 140). Seventy years later, environmentalist Rachel Carson's ground-breaking *Silent Spring* (1962) also made 'taking care of the earth' a public issue. Carson protested against the fatal effects of using toxic pesticides and herbicides in agriculture by highlighting these chemicals' capacity to penetrate the soil and accumulate in the tissues of living organisms, thereby threatening food, water and the future of life (Carson, 1962).

During the 1970s, alongside the rising awareness of the deadly effects of pesticide usage, and the possibility of nuclear war, the women's movements allied with ecological movements began protesting against (and by default connecting) patriarchy and modern technology. In illustrating those intersected social issues, Eaton narrates that "during the invasion of Vietnam, the United States used Agent Orange to defoliate the Vietnamese landscape. This atrocious activity became merged with the image of raped/despoiled women and napalm burnt/scarred children" (Eaton, 2005: 13). Anti-war protests and campaigns strongly resisted the harmful technologies employed by the military, the prevalence of gender violence in these acts of war, and the related destruction of the natural environment. Furthermore, the asymmetrical financial prioritisation of weapons production over and above health and education programmes became increasingly visible (Eaton, 2005: 13). On a conceptual level, the realisation that modern technologies did not take into account the destructive consequences of nuclear radiation, pesticides (DDT) and herbicides, household chemicals and hazardous wastes for women's reproductive capacities and the earth's ecosystems, opened the platform for feminists and ecofeminists to interpret scientific, technological, and capitalist developments as a result of patriarchal control (Merchant, 1996: 11). Activists and scholars asserted that to end male control over women's bodies and the earth, and attain the liberation of both, direct political action needed to be taken (Diamond and Orenstein, 1990: ix; Merchant, 1980; Ruether, 1975).

The young mother, Lois Gibbs, became known for being one of the first activists to bring attention to the intertwined issues of environmental degradation and health care in the United States. In *Loving Canal: My Story* (1982), Gibbs narrates how she discovered that her children's

health problems were caused by toxins. In learning that her son's elementary school was built upon a toxic waste dump, Gibbs' tireless efforts led to the relocation of 833 households in Love Canal, New York. The focus on environmental and health connected issues together with news of ecological disasters contributed to escalating activist actions and the organization of several conferences, bringing together feminist and ecological scholars and activists. According to ecofeminist Charlene Spretnak (1990: 8), the first of such events was held in 1974, entitled *Women and the Environment*, and took place at the University of California, Berkeley. In 1980, the *Women and Life on Earth* conference, held in Amherst, Massachusetts, brought together 600 scholars and grassroots activists who highlighted the urgency of exploring the connections between militarism, feminism, healing and ecology (King, Y., 1983: 9). Gibbs was one of the key note speakers, foregrounding the increased importance of women's politicization in grassroots actions (Mellor, 1997: 40). The *Women's Pentagon Action* was organized later in the same year and brought more than 2000 women together in protest for two days outside of the Pentagon. This protest initiative was a reaction to the US government's decision to escalate the Cold War by sending cruise missiles to strategic sites throughout Europe (Eaton, 2005: 13). Narrating the Pentagon protest incident Leland and Caldecott asserted that: "[w]e are gathering at the Pentagon on November the 16<sup>th</sup> because we fear for our lives. We fear for the life of this planet, our Earth, and the life of the children who are our human future" (1983: 15).

In 1987, the University of Southern California in Los Angeles hosted a conference entitled *Ecofeminist Perspectives*. Here, activists and scholars contributed greatly to bringing ecological-feminist issues onto the national and international agenda. In this way, ecofeminists' main concerns started to be represented by "women working in toxic waste, health, media, spirituality, art, theatre, energy, urban ecology, or conservation and from the stance of theorists, activists, educators, dreamers or social critics" (Eaton, 2005: 14).

### *The Connections between Women and Nature in the Global South*

As mentioned above, in the same way, and yet on a whole different level, Southern women were also fighting against life-sustaining threats long before ecofeminism became a vibrant concept, much less a movement. According to Indian physicist and ecofeminist Vandana Shiva, to protest against the harmful effects impacting women's health and living conditions, due to the ways that women and nature have been disregarded by patriarchal political and economic interests, was not

revolutionary in the Global South (Shiva, 1996: 70). Rather, she emphasised Southern women's daily struggle for survival in the midst of ecological degradation and patriarchal social norms. In the South, the health problems generated by ecological issues (polluted water and air, drafts, inundation and deforestation) are primarily intertwined with poverty and somewhat related to Western colonization (*ibid.*). Moreover, the unequal class structure within different societies, commonly divided along racial lines, forged critical links between gender, race, poverty and ecological degradation. For Shiva, the ethnographies of sexually exploitative divisions of labour, life-threatening contexts, and the need to conserve water, lands and forests positioned women at the vanguard in ecological struggles within their communities (1996).

In India, women's resistance against deforestation dates back to 1730 when Amritha Devi led a successful movement to stop the Maharaja of Jodhpur's men from cutting the sacred trees of their village by clinging to them (Gnanadason, 1996: 78). According to Indian activist and feminist theologian Aruna Gnanadason (1996: 78), the problems caused by colonialism and development projects (e.g. deforestation) severely threaten a balanced and sustainable life in India. In an attempt to maintain sustainability, a women's movement in India called the Chipko emerged in the 1970s. Inspired by the initiative of Amritha Devi, the Chipko women, best known as "tree-huggers", started tree-embracing activism to save their forests and valleys from erosion caused by the widespread cash cropping for the market. The movement gained support from locals (mostly children, the elderly and women) and engaged in protests, marches, picketing, singing, as well as embracing trees and other actions that directly confronted lumberjacks and police. The women and children involved in Chipko interestingly revived ancient rituals rooted in Indian cultures where the worshipping of tree goddesses—sacred trees as images of the cosmos—and sacred forests and groves were common religious practices (see Gnanadason, 1996: 78-79). Their actions are mainly based on maintaining ecologically viable relations between humans and nature. From Chipko's point of view, the use of the forest is only for basic human needs, i.e. food, fuel, fodder, fertilizer, water, and medicine. In contrast, cash-cropping use of water, agriculture and animal husbandry are directly opposed to ecological sustainability. The Chipko movement later became a significant symbol of inspiration within other ecofeminist movements.

In the early 1980s, in the urban areas of Northern Brazil, Gebara, who had not yet explicitly advocating feminist views, was fully invested in social transformation from a

liberation theological perspective by unearthing the multi-layered forms of oppression at the margins. In “Educação Popular: Sementes de um Mundo Novo” (Popular Education: Seeds for a New World, 1982) and “Vida Religiosa e Educação Popular” (Religious Life and Popular Education, 1984),<sup>13</sup> Gebara problematized the issue of “immediacy”. By immediacy, she referred to the culture of despair, arising out of contexts of exacerbated poverty, where actions, behaviours as well as religiosity were determined by the population’s immediate physical and material needs. Due to women’s institutionalized domestic roles, they struggled for survival in the emerging capitalist economic system. The new dominant political and economic systems were not only bringing about new forms of economical oppression, but also rendered transparent the existing forms of hierarchical oppression (Gebara, 1992 [1984]: 7-24). In discussing how unemployment harshly impacted poor people’s health, Gebara indirectly foregrounded the link between patriarchal oppression and ecological deterioration. In her theological writings, Gebara invoked the experiences of women living at the margins:

Márcia, Luíza and Francisca help their mother who is a lavadeira.<sup>14</sup> They live near by the Peixinhos channel in Olinda, which is close to a slaughterhouse. Often, this slaughterhouse empties its sewers into the channel and the children are notified about this ‘event’ by the horrid smell that plagues the region and by the vultures seeking carrion. The girls then go to the channel’s bank in order to collect the floating animal’s faeces, they dry the faeces in the sun, scramble them using their own hands, they bag the faeces, and go to sell the nearly 2kg bags as manure to the small vegetable gardens nearby. (Gebara, 1992: 13)

Gebara (2003c: 163-176) among others, frequently discussed the themes of poverty, environmental degradation, and women’s oppression as intertwined consequences of colonization. From the fifteenth century onwards, European settlers initiated colonial and ecological disruption on the lands of Africa, India, the Americas and the Pacific islands. The need to extract natural resources for trade in the European market and to settle in ‘the new lands’ disrupted native people’s modes of agriculture and subsistence. Historians Mark A. Burkholder

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<sup>13</sup> Gebara’s article “Educação Popular: Sementes de um Mundo Novo” (Popular Education: Seeds for a New World, 1982) was re-published in her *Vida Religiosa: da Teologia Patriarcal à Teologia Feminista – Um Desafio para o Futuro* (Religious Life: From Patriarchal Theology to Feminist Theology: A Challenge for the Future, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> *Lavadeira* means a woman who washes clothes on a daily basis for more affluent families. In the North of Brazil, where Olinda is situated, *lavadeiras* normally wash at the rivers’ banks.

and Lyman L. Johnsons (2010: 43-46; 83-91) examined the social implications of these colonial exploits for the Global South together with the exigencies caused by the industrial revolution (eighteenth century). The escalating demands from the market increased extraction of cash crops, therefore, a greater demand for Third World natural resources. This, in turn, caused further marginalisation of native peoples through forced relocation onto depleted lands, contributing to widening the gap between working class and the elite in various countries.

Dominant gender norms throughout history have heightened intersecting forms of oppression of native, black and *mulata* women. As noted by feminist liberation theologian María Pilar Aquino (2002 [1993]) and Gebara (2003c) the colonization of women and men in the Global South was undertaken in very distinct ways. Native women and black-African female slaves were separated from men and subjected to sexual exploitation in order to guarantee the reproduction of the work force and to satisfy the colonizers' sexual needs. Additionally, child-rearing solely became the responsibility of women as husbands were separated from their wives (Gebara, 2003c: 170; Aquino, 2002: 46). In "Women and the Theology of Liberation" Ana María Bidegain (1989: 15-36), argued that the colonizers defined and divided gendered social roles based on biological, cultural and economic ideologies structured by the rigid medieval European division of sexual roles. Gebara has pointed out that in employing the word "*mulatas*", the colonizers cultural-symbolic preconceptions about women and nature generated new forms of dualistic oppression under colonial rule (2003c: 169).

When Black women were exploited on large sugar plantations in northern-Brazil, not only for their farm labour, but also for domestic and sex work, they became a prized sex symbol. Mulatto women are known for the sexual appetite they inspire, their sexuality, their sense of rhythm, and their physical strength. The word "*mulatto*" comes from "mule," a beast of burden that does not complain when beaten by its master. The animal side of nonhuman "nature" is thus affirmed in the body of Black women. Further, the symbolism is closely linked to the reality of economic and social exploitation. This symbolism has entered the music and literature of Brazil. (Gebara, 2003c: 169)

In the South, women's concern for the environment has predominantly been linked to political and activist movements for women's emancipation and liberation (Gebara, 2007a: 97-100;

Shiva, 1996). To care for the environment represents women's daily fight for their family's basic subsistence. Shiva has recurrently brought attention to Southern women's ecological concerns and organized forms of protests as informed by the purpose of ameliorating economic and social hardships. Yet, Shiva acknowledges that ecological alienation is also a reality among Southern women, particularly among the consumerist elite (Shiva, 1996: 71). Shiva stresses the role that women have played in the ecological movement in the South while also recognizing that it is not only women who are challenging the industrial system or development projects. Gebara (1991a; 2000a) and Shiva (1996) emphasise the undervalued and significant role that women have played in maintaining life within their communities. They also share the same starting point for their views on the relationship between women and nature; namely that as categories, masculinity and femininity are socially and culturally constructed and not biologically determined. They also highlight the impact of colonialism and postcolonial realities as informing historically conditioned gender categories.

Before introducing a discussion about women, ecology and development, I would like to draw attention to the connected experiences of oppression that women have faced independently of their geographic contexts. It was through experiencing the results caused by irresponsible technologies under the guise of progress and various harmful development projects that women first came together to protest against ecological destruction. In defending their family's right to survival, women began questioning the nature of progress and development, and whether or not it really improved their lives. Although the oppression of women and nature is clearly visible in the South, what connects Northern and Southern contexts is women's vulnerability to the ecological crisis. While men commonly inhabit dominant positions of power, women are the ones who really experience the consequences of militarism, industrial and political decisions. In general, women are the ones who care for the children and elders; they are the ones that often intensely experience the consequences of polluted air or poisoned rivers. Yet as Mellor points out, women have historically had "limited access to the centres of decision-making," that have caused such crises to begin with (Mellor, 1997: 24). For me, this situation draws attention to the fact that those who initially began 'ecofeminist' activities were not necessarily feminist scholars, but women who were defending the immediate welfare of their families, neighbours and communities. While these forerunners might not have a sophisticated theoretical understanding of the multiple roots and forms of oppression, they nonetheless had a clear commitment to social

change. Gibbs' has said that she never thought of herself as an activist before, and she only ever dreamed of being a homemaker, "I was a housewife, a mother, but all of sudden it was my family, my children, my neighbours" (Gibbs, 1993: ix). I would argue that whatever propelled Gibbs and thousands of others to fight, whether it was love, loss, solidarity, generosity or social responsibility, inspired an openness and determination to transform their reality. The following section invoke examples of ecological and economic injustices that have informed collaborative initiatives among women globally.

## **2.2 Women, Ecology and Development**

Development projects' impact on women and the environment came into focus at the international level during the early 1970s. The United Nations General Assembly declared 1975 the International Women's Year and organized the first World Conference on Women in Mexico City, here they also recommended a United Nations Decade for Women (1976-1985).<sup>15</sup> In Shiva's *Let us Survive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1996), she argued that the United Nations Decade for Women was based on the assumption that sustainable development in the Southern hemisphere would improve women's economic position (1996: 65). At the beginning of the decade the main discussion focused on women's lack of involvement in developmental programmes. However, gradually it became "clear that development itself was the problem" (Shiva, 1996: 65). The whole idea of development was contested as it was evidenced by the end of the decade that women's economic realities had worsened.

Danish economist Ester Boserup's "Woman's Role in Economic Development" (1970) was the first investigation to document women's reality under processes of economic growth and development within the so called Third World. According to Boserup's research it was evident that development projects had failed women in the South by making false assumptions in generalizing their roles in rural societies and agricultural systems. In Mellor's words "development programmes had been based on the assumptions underlying the western industrial model of the sexual/gender division of labour—that men do the main productive work, while women stay at home" (Mellor, 1997: 28). However, Boserup (1970) showed that women in sub-Saharan Africa were previously active participants in the agricultural work. However, with the

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<sup>15</sup> <http://science.jrank.org/pages/9668/Women-s-Rights-U-N-Decade-Women-World-Conferences-on-Women.html> (30 September 2011).

introduction of development projects men were primarily employed into the formal economy while women were left behind in the subsistence sector. Wangari M. Maathai (2006)<sup>16</sup> from Kenya has argued that development—contrary to what was initially proposed—actually aggravated colonial abuse on women’s body and the natural resources. Development projects did not adequately incorporate concerns for sustainability and the exhaustion of natural resources left Southern populations even more impoverished. Due to the privatization of lands for revenue generation, natural resources became endangered by industrial contamination and deforestation. As women were responsible for providing their family’s daily food, they faced an extremely difficult situation. Wood and water became increasingly difficult to find, and usually required walking twice as far (Maathai, 2006). For Shiva, women’s under-development was not due to the lack of women’s participation in development projects, but the unequal opportunities given to them (1996: 65).

In 1980, midway through the United Nations Decade for Women, the general assembly was held in Copenhagen and it was reported that women constituted one-half of the world’s population. Furthermore, it was argued that women spent twice as much time at work as men did, but receiving only one tenth of the world’s income. Women also possessed less than one percent of the world’s wealth (Bidegain, 1989: 31). According to Shiva, by the end of the United Nations Decade for Women in 1985, it was evident that economic growth was the new form of colonialism.

The almost uniform conclusion of the Decade’s research is that, with a few exceptions, women’s relative access to economic resources, income and employment has worsened, their burden of work has increased, and their relative and even absolute health, nutritional and educational status has declined. (Shiva, 1996: 66)

Development projects made economic growth a costly process for women due to environmental degradation caused by the new economic system. Environmental concerns in light of women’s daily experiences were not an immediate concern within the international environmental debate. It was actually the opposite. According to Mellor,

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<sup>16</sup> Interview given in the documentary *Living Together*. In *Planet Earth*, disc 5 (2006). BBC Natural History Unity.



The failure to understand the economic position of women also led to their being seen as the perpetrators of ecological damage. As women farmers were forced on to marginal land and women generally were forced to use the dwindling resources of trees and water, it appeared that it was they, rather than logging, damming and land enclosure, who were responsible for the environmental crisis. (Mellor, 1997: 29)

However, the increased attention to environmental issues interrelated with concerns of poverty globally pressured the United Nations to also address this situation. At the United Nations conference held in Stockholm, in 1972, on the human environment, voices of non-governmental organizations from the South emerged, providing their versions of the destructive implications of the development process on local communities and the environment. Among those voices were the Chipko women advocating alternative strategies to preserve the natural forests of the Himalayas. The commitment expressed by the Chipko women, among other groups, not only debunked the distorted views about women as perpetrators of the environmental crisis, or mere victims, but demonstrated how alternatives to deal with this crisis should be grounded in local experiences and ethnographic wisdom. For Shiva the Chipko's main contribution to ecofeminism is their insight that women and nature are deeply associated, "not in passivity but in creativity and in the maintenance of life... Their voices are the voices of liberation and transformation which provide new categories of thought in new exploratory directions" (1996: 70).

The increased involvement of women's groups from the South on the international stage inspired the organization of campaigns and conferences connecting women, ecology and development. The United Nations *International Women's Workshop*, held in Bangkok in 1979, and *The New International Order*, held in The Netherlands in 1982, brought together political activists, grassroots groups, academics, environmental activists, among others, from the North and South. Southern women's main focus was related to questions of integration. If the development agenda proposed by the United Nations was in fact a project that promised to bring economic integration to women, then the voices and needs of women should be heard. In 1984, a group of women activists from Asia, Africa and Latin America met in Bangalore, India in order to share their experiences on development strategies, policies, theories, and research. They compiled an independent report on the economic position of women in the Global South to be presented at the end of the United Nations Decade for Women in Nairobi, 1985. This group, known as DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era), provided a report

that became a key reference at conferences and seminars globally. The document questioned the positive impact of development on poor people, especially women, in the context of economic and political crises. DAWN's report investigated current crises as part of interlinked forms of oppression in specific contexts of famine, debt, militarism and fundamentalism. They argued that these forms of oppression reflected similar patterns of domination experienced by women, e.g. sexual violence, exploitation, and social and political marginalization, within different social contexts (see Sen and Grown, 1987).

The DAWN report was later published as a book, *Development, Crises and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives*, written by Gita Sen and Caren Grown (1987). This book articulated a Southern feminist critique of three decades of development and also offered alternative visions. DAWN's report revealed that women's diverse experiences also intersected in several ways. For example, Sen and Grown highlighted how male-centred frameworks have oppressed women by disregarding their role in the "process by which human beings meet their basic needs and survive from one day to the next" (Sen and Grown, 1987: 50). It is important to point out that DAWN's women did not argue for increased inclusion in development processes. Rather, they advocated the need for alternative development processes, from which the principal emphasis is meeting "the basic survival needs of the majority of the world's people" (Sen and Grown, 1987: 19). They echoed a shared ideal vision of,

[A] world where inequality based on class, gender, and race is absent from every country, and from the relationships among countries...where basic needs become basic rights and where poverty and all forms of violence are eliminated. Each person will have the opportunity to develop her or his full potential and creativity, and women's values of nurturance and solidarity will characterize human relationships...women's reproductive role will be redefined: child care will be shared by men, women, and society as a whole...the massive resources now used in the production of the means of destruction will be diverted to areas where they will help to relieve oppression both inside and outside the home. This technological revolution will eliminate disease and hunger, and give women means for the safe control of their fertility...participatory democratic processes, where women share in determining priorities and making decisions. (Sen and Grown, 1987: 80-81)

DAWN's women have worked to establish a shared political position against the oppression of women and poverty through recognizing the constraints of the present global economic system. Their shared political views also speaks to the particularity of diverse contexts. In thinking together about the various mechanisms that negatively inform women's experiences, they arrived at the "identification of regional crises as the peg on which to hang the analysis of women's situations: 'Africa's food crisis, Latin America's debt, South Asia's poverty, and the militarization of the Pacific Islands'" (DAWN).<sup>17</sup> For DAWN's women it became clear that it was not possible to universalize women's experiences of poverty. Rather, they developed a platform that "at one and the same time", articulated a perspective, in which regional crises have been placed in the centre of the debate and worked as a lens through which women's oppression have been analysed. While, at the same time, the debate on alternative development strategies is carried forward (*ibid.*).

A call to consider 'Environment and Development' was launched by the United Nations and an agenda for sustainable development for the twenty-first century was proposed collaboratively by an array of experts and international leaders. This agenda was entitled, *Agenda 21*<sup>18</sup> and was prepared for the *United Nations Conference on Environment and Development* (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The year before, women from across the world, with a large representation from the Global South, gathered at the *World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet*, in Miami, Florida, in order to develop the *Women's Action Agenda 21*.<sup>19</sup> This significant document drew attention to the reality of the interconnected issues between women and the ecological crisis.

Eaton points out that even though *Agenda 21* and UNCED were supposed to include different viewpoints, there was a shockingly blunt disregard for the relationship between women, nature and development (Eaton, 2005: 24). Nonetheless, *Women's Action Agenda 21* became a pivotal document, from which solid data was provided for those researching and working in the fields of gender and development. The report has thoroughly researched, analysed and critically engaged the problems generated by the "destructive patterns that are devastating to women and the earth, especially in poor countries...[and in turn offered] precise guidelines and vision to redress some of the central ills that have led to the crisis" (Eaton, 2005: 15). Similar to Shiva's

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<sup>17</sup> <http://dawnnet.org/about.php?page=history> (26 May 2013).

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.un.org/geninfo/bp/enviro.html> (30 January 2013).

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.iisd.org/women/action21.htm> (30 September 2011).

view on women's resistance against oppression, outlined above, *Women's Action Agenda 21* is not compiled by stories of horror; neither is it an idealistic document full of promises and hopes. Instead, it makes women's agency clear and from an ecofeminist perspective it represents the first international ecofeminist manifesto.

### **2.3 The Academic Intersection**

The intersectional links between women and nature as objectified and manipulated by patriarchy and global capitalism, were exceedingly raised by women activists and academics in the North and South. While the aforementioned movements and campaigns did not formally represent a global ecofeminist movement, they brought significant information, insights and perspective to the conceptualization of ecofeminism. These movements worked toward the realisation of egalitarian values, ethics and worldviews, which ought to replace the dominant hierarchical mode of thinking so prevalent within the Western world. According to Warren, grassroots and/or political movements became an inspirational example to the development of ecofeminist concepts, analyses and worldviews (Warren, 1987: 3).

The women-nature connections that emerged from women's diverse experiences together with reports on environmental degradation impacted feminist academics to such an extent that the construction of a ecofeminist paradigm seemed to be imperative. A new focus of study was developed within the feminist discourse to investigate the connections between women and nature's shared oppression. As mentioned in chapter one, D'Eaubonne's *Le Féminisme Ou La Morte* (Feminism or Death, 1974) was a response to the crisis of modernity. Other scholars, inspired by D'Eaubonne, began developing various feminist views on the role that women should play within this crisis. Radical cultural feminist Mary Daly was one of the first to introduce d'Eaubonne's text to her students in Boston in 1974. In the same year, Christian feminist theologian Rosemary R. Ruether presented lectures on "women and ecology", while the conference on "Women and Environment" was organized at the University of California, Berkeley. In Vermont, at the Institute for Social Ecology, Ynestra King was actively working on developing social and political ecofeminist approaches (Sandilands, 1999). Ruether's pioneering book, *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (1975), recognized and made transparent the ecofeminist connection to orthodox Christian theology. As a way to relate ecofeminist concerns with Christian theology, Ruether stated that,

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of the society. (Ruether: 1975: 204)

Feminism and ecology were brought together in the ecofeminist recognition of the destructive juxtapositions of humanity versus nature, masculine versus feminine, and the correlation between the two binary categories (Hoel and Nogueira-Godsey, 2011: 5-15). Thus, ecofeminists' focus on interlinked forms of oppression and domination became a central analytical nexus. Philosopher Karen Warren developed the phrase the "logic of domination" (1987: 6) to refer to the parallel domination of humans over nature and men over women. She argued that this logic of domination needed to be deconstructed in order to liberate both nature and women.

Euro-Western ecofeminism contested women's "natural" inferior position in society, as reflected in dualistic and hierarchical patriarchal conceptual frameworks. Characteristically, patriarchal worldviews are fraught with hierarchical binaries (e.g. men/women, culture/nature, mind/body and white/black), which shapes our view of ourselves and of the natural world. Those ecofeminists argue that the categories of class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion, for example, are narrowly used by patriarchy to idealize masculinity and sanction the oppression of both women and nature. Globally, ecofeminists encouraged women to think outside of the patriarchal "conceptual trap" by reconceptualizing themselves and their relation to the nonhuman natural world (Warren 1987: 7).<sup>20</sup> The historical investigation of the root-causes of patriarchal and environmental oppression became a central part of ecofeminist studies. Some ecofeminist scholars, such as Neo-Pagan priestess Carol Christ (1997), have shown a deep interest in investigating not only the origins of patriarchy, but also how patriarchy took its place in the Western world. Christ's work has been under the influence of archaeologist Marija Gimbutas (1989: 63-71), who has interpreted cult images found in Neolithic towns, such as Catal Hüyük in Anatolia.

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<sup>20</sup> In "Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections" Karen Warren refers to the work of Elizabeth Dodson Gray, who argues that the patriarchal "conceptual trap" is "a set of outmoded beliefs" and "a way of thinking that is like a room which—once inside—you cannot imagine a world outside" (in Warren 1987: 7).

By shifting from a large set of interconnections to an in-depth investigation of history and culture, the development of an intellectual debate on a viable and alternative future for women and the earth developed. In particular, cultural and socio-economic trajectories in Western history were examined. According to Eaton, ecofeminists have come to the agreement that, “[the] negative women-nature correlation became established within Euro-western worldviews and has specific roots in the philosophical, religious and scientific developments” (2005: 38). Hence, the study of the origins of domination as a mode of relationship has a double value to ecofeminists. First, it has helped them to understand some of the reasons for existing forms of oppression towards women and nature. Second, through understanding these root causes, new modes of relationships are envisioned.

From different parts of the world, the domination of women and the destruction of the environment have been studied within various disciplines in the social sciences (e.g. gender studies, environmental studies, anthropology, economics and sociology). Within religious studies, women from the perspective of different religious traditions began investigating the roots for the domination of women and nature in dialogue with emerging ecofeminist theories. Increased interdisciplinary dialogue has contributed to the development of a more multi-layered analysis of the women-nature connection (Eaton, 2005: 58). This multi-dialogue has brought to ecofeminists’ attention that “the feminizing of nature and the naturalizing of women are only one aspect of their domination” (Eaton, 2005: 58). As an example from the Latin American context, Gebara has argued that the disproportionate effects of ecological degradation on women “[have] nothing to do with women being more connected to the earth than men” (Gebara, 1997b: 14). For Gebara, diverse relations of power, such as childrearing and domestic work, inform the current abuses of women and nature (1997b: 14-15). Similarly, Gabriele Dietrich (1996) has demonstrated the interconnection between the degradation of natural resources and the oppression towards women’s bodies in urban slums of Madurai City of Tamil Nadu. In analysing the sort of work that has been allocated to women in their communities—e.g., some women work as small vendors of flowers and vegetables or domestic workers in other peoples’ houses—Dietrich (1996: 87-88) points out how the long work hours in addition to their own housework have resulted in “physical and mental exhaustion” (1996: 88). In general, women have to start before dawn to fetch water, cook and take their children to school. The survival of the family and the provision of its basic needs are a woman’s responsibility. In addition, women’s bodies are

understood to be the husband's property, and they can demand sexual services at will and reserve the right to beat and, in some cases, even kill their wife (1996: 88-89).

It is important to note that the ecofeminist movement, due to its varied localised approaches, points of entry and “distinct sets of concerns, orientations and political goals” is a diverse discourse (Eaton, 2005: 11). It is the diversity of ecofeminism that has contributed to unearthing complex layers of oppression normalized by religious systems and patriarchal cultures. On the other hand, this diversity has been the central reason for the difficulty of establishing a shared political ecofeminist strategy.

#### **2.4. Ecofeminist Basic Tenets**

Due to the fact that ecofeminist theologies are informed by ecofeminist theories, this section offers an overview of the basic tenets that are of vital importance in unpacking ecofeminist theologies. Ecofeminism as a discourse draws from feminist theory and ecological theories in order to critique the dominant Western mechanistic and reductionist way to understand the universe, which perceives individuals as existing separately from the environment. In particular, deep ecology has inspired ecofeminists' development of a constructive paradigm for understanding the world.<sup>21</sup> For example, deep ecology's emphasis on reality as fundamentally relational and interconnected is invaluable to the ecofeminist worldview. According to physicist and deep ecologist Fritjof Capra, new scientific ways to understand the universe do not concentrate on the parts that make up the whole, but in an “integrated whole whose essential properties arise from the relationships between its parts...a phenomenon within the context of a larger whole” (Capra, 1996: 27). Scientists Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry (1992), as well as Lynn Margulis (1981) and James Lovelock (1982), have elaborated that nature and humanity have come into being as the result of a complex process of interactions that are both interconnected and interdependent.<sup>22</sup> Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, by explaining that the planet is one single living organism, has foregrounded nascent ecological philosophies or ecosophies, as called by Arne Naess (1989), that analyse the earth and the relationships of its parts within the

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<sup>21</sup> For more information on deep ecology and green movements see, Arne Naess and D. Rothenberg's *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy* (1989); Arne Naess and P. I. Haukeland's *Life's Philosophy: Reason and Feeling in a Deeper World* (2002); Bill Devall and George Sessions' *Deep Ecology* (1985).

<sup>22</sup> For similar views see also Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution* (2009 [1904]).

context of the larger whole (Lovelock, 1982).<sup>23</sup> By stressing these ecological perspectives, ecologists and scientists view nature and humanity as not separate, but conceive the Earth as a network of life.

Ecofeminist theologies draw from ecofeminist theories and the ecological theories that have inspired their views. Many ecofeminist theologians began articulating notions of interrelationality between humans and the earth. Biblical interpretations became informed by the desire to transform the human-earth relationship in such a way that a sustained and viable future could be imagined. Sallie Macfague's influential work, *The Body of God: A Ecological Theology* (1993), developed understandings of the Earth as God's or Goddess' body. Other ecofeminist theologians, such as Ivone Gebara (1999), inspired by Thomas Berry's panentheistic perspectives, foregrounded views of the earth as infused with divine presence. Ecofeminist theologian Heather Eaton (2005) stated that "humans are fully a part of nature and earth's ecosystems, and are differentiated as a species but not as ontologically other than natural. Humanity, in my view, has no additional, other or superior 'nature', regardless of human pretense to the contrary" (Eaton: 2005: 48). In developing theologies based on benign human and human-earth relations, ecofeminist theologians focused on developing paradigms free from patriarchal and hierarchal forms of thinking. According to Eaton, "[w]hether formally articulated or not, the sense of belonging to a system which functions as a whole [became] an integral part of ecofeminism" (Eaton, 2005: 18).

Radical feminism's early analysis of women's domination as linked with "imposed marriage, the nuclear family, romantic love, the capitalist state, and patriarchal religion" (Merchant, 1996: 14), has been invoked and re-discussed from various ecofeminist angles.<sup>24</sup> On the theoretical level, ecofeminists have centred their investigations on the connections of domination between women's bodies, domestic work and the exploitation of nature by analysing the relationships between hierarchy, power-control, modernity, capitalism and religion. They have envisioned the restructuring of society in ways that liberate women to redefine their identity and social roles, and therein "transcend the public-private dichotomy necessary to capitalist

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<sup>23</sup> For example, see Fritjof Capra's *The Web of Life* (1996).

<sup>24</sup> Merchant in *earthcare: Women and the Environment* (1996) has discussed the ways that early radical feminist analysis of women's forms of oppression has been reclaimed by social ecofeminists and Socialist ecofeminists. It is important to note that these two ecofeminist categories are part of Merchant's own categorization of ecofeminism. She has divided ecofeminism by cultural ecofeminism, liberal ecofeminism, social ecofeminism and Socialist ecofeminist. Merchant herself is a leading scholar advancing Socialist ecofeminism.



production and the bureaucratic state” (Merchant, 1996: 13-14). Questions about the interrelation between culture and human society, together with bodies, biology and non-human nature became increasingly important. There are certain publications (following below) that became influential in grounding the development of two distinct responses to these matters and, from which different strategies were proposed in order to forge an egalitarian society. The distinctions that separated the two proposed responses were not always very clear, but it can be explained through exploring the question on whether women are essentially connected to nature, or, if women were historically and socially positioned on the side of nature in the nature-culture divide.

By contesting the patriarchal negative association between women and nature, some ecofeminists reclaimed this connection and developed the thesis that women indeed appreciate humanity’s relationship to the earth more than men. This is so due to “their own embodiment as a female” (Mellor, 1997: 2). The emergence of essentialist views within ecofeminism were inspired by an alternative interpretation of the work of radical or cultural feminists such as Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology: The MetaEthics of Radical Feminism* (1978), that embraced the theory of an original gynocentric world founded in the works of scholars such as Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (1976).<sup>25</sup> Daly proposed to reverse the truth of patriarchal theology by asserting the truths of feminist theology. Her feminist project sought to exalt women’s true ability, which is lacking in men, to bond with all non-human living beings and the cosmos in order to free women from patriarchal oppression (see Daly, 1978; 1984). Susan Griffin’s *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (1978) adopts a poetic language to denounce the oppressive patterns in the relationship between scientific/technological man and nature/woman. Although Mellor has argued that Griffin, by using poetry and giving female voices to animals, did not elaborate on a biological connection between woman and nature (Mellor, 1997: 59), it is undeniable that her book contributed to promoting essentialism in early ecofeminism. Ecofeminist essentialist views were most responsive when anthropologist and feminist Sherry Ortner (1972) raised the question: “Is female to male as nature is to culture?” By investigating the universal correspondence of gender relations with biological sex, Ortner (1972) argued that due to patriarchal thinking women have been symbolically associated with nature because their reproductive capacity resembles the earth life cycles, thus situating them closer to it. By being primarily defined by their sexual functions women are further constrained by patriarchal sexual

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<sup>25</sup> The belief of a primordial gynocentric world from a pre-patriarchal era will be approached soon in this section.

ideologies. Thereafter, it was assumed by some essentialist ecofeminists that “female is to male as nature is to culture.”

The early radical feminist proposal to overcome male-dominated culture was to recognize that motherhood engendered “a valuable way of thinking and behaving” (Lorber, 2010: 122). Female characteristics like nurturing and caring was conceivably undervalued by men in Western societies. Hence these characteristics were envisioned by radical feminists as essential to the construction of an egalitarian society. Their logic was that if men would take interest in developing “maternal thinking...they would be less prone to [...] violence, aggression, and militarism” (Lorber, 2010: 131). Through highlighting the women-nature connection, some ecofeminists envisioned overcoming male-dominated culture not only by recognizing in motherhood a valuable way of behaving, but the right way of thinking and being. They reclaimed the connection between women and nature as empowering and having the potential to overthrow patriarchy.

Ynestra King has explained that during the early stages of the conceptualization of ecofeminism, the “recognition of women as embodied, earth-bound living beings who should celebrate their connection to the rest of life” (King, Y., 1990: 112) sounded liberating and empowering. The celebration of women’s sexuality and their natural cycles of menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and menopause became conceptually interlinked with the earth’s cycles and used to challenge patriarchal constructed taboos in relation to women’s body.<sup>26</sup> Some of these ecofeminists also began seeking new forms of spirituality that affirmed women’s corporeality and strong relationship with nature. Nature-based forms of spirituality became an attractive option. In view of the fact that many nature-based cosmologies stress the organic relationship between humans and nature, some ecofeminists searched for forms of spirituality where social and ecological relationships were structured in egalitarian ways. For some North American ecofeminist groups, the beliefs and culture of Native Americans became influential. Yet other ecofeminists identified specific epochs in ancient European history where they believed that women’s power was “represented in the symbols of women’s fertility and sexuality” (Mellor, 1997: 48).<sup>27</sup> Some of these ecofeminists connected the essentialist notion of

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<sup>26</sup> Lynda Warwick’s “Feminist Wicca: Paths to Empowerment” (1995: 121-133) explores strategies emerging from Wicca’s forms of spirituality that have been used to heal and empower women who have been raped.

<sup>27</sup> For further exploration of the fertility symbols invoked by cultural ecofeminists, see Ruether’s *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (1992) and Riane Eisler’s *The Chalice and the Blade* (1987).

the women-nature link with these diverse forms of spiritualities. Others advocated for a religious dialogue with earth-based traditions without necessarily biologizing women's relationship with the earth.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the discovery of historical and archaeological sources of an "old religion" practiced by an ancient matricentric or gynocentric society pre-dating patriarchal times deeply informed spiritual and essentialist ecofeminists, notwithstanding that the two categories (spiritual and essentialist) are not necessarily interlinked. Some spiritual ecofeminists, such as Carol Christ who does not encourage essentialist notion between women and nature, have contributed to popularizing ideas of a lost paradise and consequently a patriarchal take-over of the pre-patriarchal society. Christ's ecofeminist theology has been greatly influenced by the work of archaeologist Marija Gimbutas (1989: 63-71), whose work focused on interpreting images and symbols of robust female bodies found in Neolithic times. Gimbutas' work was also influential to the work of pioneering ecofeminist Charlene Spretnak (1990: 3-14). Spretnak and Christ began voicing the belief that these female sculptures proved that a matricentric, egalitarian, and ecologically world existed before the rise of patriarchal warrior cultures in the Bronze Age.<sup>28</sup> Assuming the existence of an ancient matricentric tradition in which Goddess-worshipping societies of ancient Europe revered both the earth and female deities (Eller, 1991: 281; Starhawk, 1989; Spretnak, 1990: 3-14), spiritual and essential ecofeminists believed that women from this pre-patriarchal era were valued as highly as men while also been in control of their own bodies and lives. Based on the assumption that the Mother Goddess was the divine principle, those ecofeminists understand that egalitarian principles were the basis of male and female participation in society due to the existence of a female deity (Rountree, 2007: 213).

Ecofeminists who believed that social harmony could be restored through the "old religion" played a central role in the development of an ecofeminist essentialist anthropology, which was also accompanied by specific forms of spiritual practice. It was through uniting these points that essentialist spiritual ecofeminists justified the construction of a female anthropology and epistemology where women are not only different, but they are also in essence closer to nature than men (see Starhawk, 1990: 73-86; 1989). Feminist Wiccan priestess Starhawk was one of the first ecofeminists to advocate that through matricentric ancient traditions humans will be able to re-adjust their social mode of relating (1989 [1979]). Starhawk envisioned a utopian

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<sup>28</sup> The Bronze Age is understood here as existing between the period of 4500-2800 B.C.E.

future where the female power and domain would be restored, and humans and nature would be able to live free of patriarchal domination (1989: 16-17; 1987: 18-19). Another influential voice was that of “theologian”<sup>29</sup> Carol Christ. Like Daly, Christ rejected her Christian background arguing that religions that cherished the patriarchal transcendent God taught people to identify the self with abstract ideas that disconnected them from the earth (Christ, 1989: 314-325). For Christ, embracing earth-based spiritualities and the old religion offered more egalitarian and earth-connecting forms of spirituality (Christ, 1989). Yet, she avoided essentialist understandings of the women-nature connection. Rather, Christ articulated dynamic and interlinked relationships between male and female, mind and body, heaven and earth, light and dark, transcendence and immanence (Christ, 1997: 109-112). She also argued for the immanence of Goddess spirituality as a way to enable people to cope with the natural process of human life (suffering, illness, death) by celebrating life’s important transitions (birth, death) (Christ, 1992b: 274). In her view, religion can bring harmony to society as it may have existed in pre-patriarchal times (1997: 62-67). Although during the 1970s, Euro-Western ecofeminist literature often foregrounded essentialist forms of spirituality and a return to matricentric social arrangements dominated ecofeminist published works, Eaton argues that “the majority of ecofeminist spirituality is not essentialist” (Eaton, 2005: 23).

The second response about the women-nature connection was voiced by those scholars who were more interested in the historical and social constructions of women as closer to nature. In general, these ecofeminists refute any essentialist argumentation. They have been inspired by the works of women such as Carolyn Merchant’s *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and Scientific Revolution* (1980). Merchant traced the socio-cultural roots that brought about associating the feminine with the natural environment and perceiving women as naturally inferior to men (1980). In doing so, she rendered visible a misogynist and dualistic-hierarchical framework from which the scientific revolution emerged. According to Merchant, as scientists began departing from the belief that the earth was alive to the mechanical conceptualization of the earth as a resource for human consumption and control, the exacerbation of the culture-nature split became evident (1980: 169-170). Furthermore, Merchant argued that instrumentalist and mechanical understandings of the world generates a market-oriented economic development,

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<sup>29</sup> Carol Christ, in *Rebirth of the Goddess* (1997), was the first scholar to publish the Goddess “thea-logy,” Followed by Melissa Raphael’s *Introducing Thealogy* (1999). *Thealogy*, from *thea*, “Goddess,” and *logos*, “meaning.” Thealogy is reflection on the meaning of the Goddess.

which does not recognize the intrinsic value of marginalized people, societies or nature. Additionally, these understandings contribute to perpetuating ecological, socio-economic and gender exploitation.

Merchant, who was an early promoter of the compatibility between socialism and ecofeminism, proposed a reconceptualization of production and reproduction. She explained that if the “patriarchal relations of reproduction reveal the domination of women by men” and “capitalist relations of production reveal the domination of nature by men” (Merchant, 1996: 6-7), then ecofeminism should work to change the category of reproduction rather than production and make it “central to the concept of a just, sustainable world” (1996: 15). Based on the premises of Marxist feminism, Merchant understands the natural environment as “the material basis of all of life and that food, clothing, shelter, and energy are essential to the maintenance of human life” (Merchant, 1996: 15). However, she argues, the fundamental source of the problem is “the rise of capitalist patriarchy and the ideology that the Earth can be exploited for human progress through technology” (Merchant, 1990: 103). Even though nature and its resources remain the basis of all life, humanity has disrupted their own well-being and future through constructed systems of production, in which profit maximization is the ultimate goal.

According to Mellor, a socialist ecofeminist view proposes a “multileveled structural analysis” from which the “dialectical relationship between production and reproduction as well as society and nature” is seen as a potential source of social and ecological sustainable transformation (1997: 63). Starting from the basis that nature is historically and socially constructed and transformed through human praxis, “[t]he same is true for gender. It is created by biology and social practices” (Mellor, 1997: 62). According to Merchant, in tribal traditions and agrarian societies women played a significant role in interacting with the environment. She explains that women,

As gatherers of food, fuel, and medicinal herbs; fabricators of clothing; planters, weeders, and harvesters of horticultural crops; tenders of poultry; preparers and preservers of food; and bearers and caretakers of young children, women’s intimate knowledge of nature has helped to sustain life in every global human habitat. (Merchant, 1996: 16)

However, through the sexual division of labour women's traditional roles and interaction with nature have been appropriated by men and circumscribed by capitalism. With technological advances agriculture became increasingly mechanized, and fell under male control. While male and female slaves and migrants was needed to supply the stoop labour necessary in the field (Merchant, 1992), the "middle-class women's role shifted from production to the reproduction of daily life in the home, focusing on increased domesticity and the bearing and socialization of young children" (Merchant, 1996: 16).

Moreover, by elaborating on how human reproduction is both social and biological, Merchant argued that under capitalist society reproduction is always subordinate to production. She illustrated this by foregrounding men's control over production in various trades and merchandise exchange, while the reproduction of the species, and concomitantly, the workforce, is the primary responsibility of women through their unpaid labour in the domestic sphere (Merchant, 1996: 16). Drawing on Engels, Merchant argued that by reproducing life, "humans interact with nonhuman nature, sustaining or disrupting local and global ecologies" (1996: 15). Since the capitalist ideals of economic growth have linked nature and waste by perceiving both as externalities in profit maximization, its logic prevents sustainability (1996: 16). On the other hand, "the logic of socialism...is based on the fulfilment of people's needs, not people's greed. Because growth is not necessary to the economy, socialism has the potential for sustainable relations with the nature" (*ibid.*). By envisioning a socialist ecology, human production and reproduction should ideally reflect nature's reproduction and production.

From a bioregionalist perspective, Judith Plant (1990: 155-161) expresses similar views to Merchant. Plant (1990: 158-161) speaks of a society where people learn how to provide for their biological needs in a biocentric manner. She invites people to part with anthropocentric attitudes and learn with other species how to fit into particular environments sustainably. A biocentric way of living requires one to become aware of the diversity of life and their particular relationships around them (1990: 158). According to Plant, "bioregionalism means learning to become native to place, fitting ourselves to a particular place, not fitting a place to our predetermined tastes" (*ibid.*). In other words, to become native to a place means the development of ecologically and socially sustainable patterns of mutual existence. In different times, it resonates with the indigenous ways to exist, which have learned how to socially organise their communities in light of their environmental surroundings. From a similar perspective, Judith

Ress (1996: 51-60) foregrounds that our postcolonial world has lost much of its tribal wisdom. For example, the rituals and practices that various tribes used for population control have been forgotten. However, recently overpopulation has made it difficult to maintain the balance of the ecosystem due to the increasing demands of the household (e.g., plumbing, electricity and food) (Merchant, 1996: 17). Linking the views about learning from tribal wisdom and bioregionalist developments does not mean that we need to return to a romanticized agrarian lifestyle as in an ancient matricentric time. As an example, for Gebara, indigenous traditions teach that “virtue lies in moderation” (1999: 79). Merchant has explained the interconnection and interdependency between humans and the environment by demonstrating that the “lack of proper food, water, soil chemicals, atmospheric gases, adverse weather [and] disease can disrupt the survival of offspring to reproductive age” among human and non-human species (1996: 17). From a Socialist perspective, Merchant argues that ecofeminism should be about responsible reproduction, where production does not affect local ecology, and where the natural world and the human world are seen as active agents as well as material forces. In this light, “ecological and biological conditions, social production and reproduction are all forces creating and shaping human society” (Mellor, 1997: 62) and continued life on planet earth (Merchant, 1992: 209).

In *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (1986), German sociologist Maria Mies foregrounded the intersection of human mastery over nature with the sexual division of labour. Mies interpreted the association between women and nature through the thesis that each historical epoch defines maleness and femaleness according to the main mode of production. In this way, biological differences between humans “are *differently interpreted and valued*, according to the dominant form of appropriation of natural matter for the satisfaction of human needs” (Mies, 1986: 53).<sup>30</sup> Throughout history, “men and women have developed a qualitatively different relationship to their own bodies” (insert ref). Roswitha Leukert argues that this historical process also led male and female to “two qualitatively different forms of appropriation of external nature” (in Mies, 1986: 53), which, according to Mies, means “two qualitatively distinct forms of relations to the objects of appropriation, the objects of sensuous bodily activity” (Mies, 1986: 53). Mies highlighted that the logic of domination took disproportional measurements through colonization enterprises. The ideology of control underpinning “the rise of mechanistic science and economic progress”

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<sup>30</sup> Emphasis added.

(Eaton, 2005: 58) provided the logic for the development of “technological inventions necessary for warfare and conquest” (Eaton, 2005: 18). Mies contends that the rise of the capitalist economic system, which disregards women and nature, is resulting from this historical process. The socio-economic dimensions of this historical process have resulted in, and justified slave trade, the domination of others, and the destruction of subsistence economies.

Shiva and Mies’ *Ecofeminism* (1993) provided an analysis of the women-nature connection from a global perspective. They examined the development of the European ideology of control, which is embedded in its ideals of progress, as transported to the colonized world. Shiva and Mies have indicated that in the ideals of economic and scientific progress lay connections between patriarchy, colonization, the control of women and natural resources, economic globalization and development projects. Their research echoes the fundamental points of critique made by DAWN (1984) on the ways in which colonialism and neo-colonialism oppress women’s bodies and delineate their social roles.

Gebara (2003c: 163-176; 1989: 37-48), Ana María Bidegain (1989: 15-36) and María Pilar Aquino (1993), similarly reflect this critique and place emphasis on the ways in which the women-nature connection in patriarchal Western ideology was transported to colonized lands. For Gebara, the colonization of women’s bodies and natural resources was central to the development of capitalism in the Latin American context (2003c). In investigating how Christian symbols defined and placed women in an inferior role to that of men, Gebara opened a dialogue with Christian colonial history. For example, they investigated how, by maintaining traditional gender roles, Catholicism undeniably benefited the capitalist economic system. Bidegain (1989) and Gebara (1989) argued that the prevailing sexual division of labour in Latin America is a complex manifestation of intertwined forms of colonial oppression perpetuated by development projects and reflected in social practices. In 1997, Gebara’s book *Teologia Ecofeminista: Ensaio para Repensar o Conhecimento e a Religião (Ecofeminist Theology, 1997b)* brought ecofeminist critique into her feminist liberation theology. She argued that the sexual division of labour is also one of the main factors responsible for perpetuating unbalanced modes of relationship not only between men and women, but also between them and the natural world. By pointing out that gender roles was defined on the basis of biology, culture and economy, Gebara (2003c) demonstrated that the juxtaposition of women’s nature and the environment as “wild” underpinned colonial mentality. Consequently, the objectification of both resulted in a defining



feature of the colonial project. While the colonizers were taming mother-nature, women's bodies were subjected to the colonization of sexual and work-related exploitation. Gebara's ideas developed from the dialogue between ecofeminist theory and her witnessing of the experiences lived by poor women within her context of struggle. Gebara (see Gebara, 1994a; 1999b; 2008a) explained that questions of defending life, intrinsic to the daily domestic struggles that poor women experience, has been overlooked by those interested in social changes in Latin America. In bringing ecofeminist theory into conversation with liberationist critique, Gebara forged a feminist liberation theology that incorporated views from the South and the North. This hybrid form of doing theology challenged Latin American liberation theologians to see the reality of women, not only from a feminist perspective, but also from the perspective of how ecological degradation impacted women's lives.<sup>31</sup>

Although ecofeminists hold a number of different positions about how, why and when patriarchy emerged, a point which has also invoked an analysis on whether or not androcentrism is the oldest form of human control, the section above speaks to the importance of understanding the roots of domination. The envisioning of alternative social and ecological relations has taken different forms, which in various ways has informed ecofeminist theologians. Gebara has recently explained in an interview with Mônica Teixeira that the theological task should not be about "teaching people what to think, but rather how to *critically* think."<sup>32</sup> By drawing on, and developing ecofeminist theory in religious terms, theologians respond to the notion that "the ecological crisis is creating a pivotal moral and religious challenge" (Eaton, 2005:9). The accelerated destruction of the earth, to be inherited by future generations, has provoked an increasing commitment to promoting ecotheologies that are both informative and transformative. An all-encompassing shift in worldview is what characterises the ecofeminist theological discourse.

In the same way that feminist theologians gained inspiration from feminist theory, so have ecofeminist theologians from ecofeminist theory. These "clusters of analyses" (Eaton, 2005: 58), have informed ecofeminist theologians' quest for the root-causes of the women-nature connection within their own religious traditions. In the next section, I summarise some of the

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<sup>31</sup> See Arno Kayser and Ivone Gebara's *Teologia da Libertação e Educação Popular* (2009).

<sup>32</sup> Interview given to Mônica Teixeira on the University of São Paulo Virtual Channel - UNIVESP TV Channel (10<sup>th</sup> July, 20013).

central concepts within ecofeminist theologies, and present an introduction to debates that are elaborated and expanded in the rest of the thesis.

## **2.5 The Intersection of Ecofeminism and Christian Feminist Theologies**

### ***Dualistic and Hierarchical Thinking***

The identification of a dualistic and hierarchical framework, underpinning traditional Western philosophy, shares certain parallels with Christian traditional theologies. Gebara suggests that hierarchies inherently perpetuate evil and thus need to be challenged. A paradigm shift is the only way to avoid the emergence of new hierarchies (Gebara, 1993). Otherwise, as explained by Warren (1990), the logic of domination will continue to be part of social dynamics.

Crystallizing this critique, Eaton (2005: 38) notes that thinking in pairs or acknowledging difference is not necessarily a problem. Rather the problem emerges when one side of this pair is perceived as superior to the other, and when differences are framed as polar opposites (e.g. woman/man, feminine/masculine, emotion/reason, nature/culture, bad/good, matter/spirit) (2005: 38). It is through the polarization of pairs that hierarchical thinking emerges. The logic of polarization is one that measures everything against the yardstick of the superior (Eaton, 2005: 39). The characteristics of the inferior and superior, respectively, are gradually naturalised and normalised—for example, every woman is emotional, motherly and weaker than man. This hierarchical-dualistic understanding, ecofeminist theologians argue, permeates Christian theology and became an inherent part of religious consciousness. Furthermore, normativity as a source of exclusion, although not a new insight with respect to ecofeminist theory, became the focus of much debate within ecofeminist theologies. The rapid destruction of ecosystems in contemporary societies is evidence of normative hierarchical and dualistic worldviews.

Gebara's ecofeminist theology aims to develop an ecological culture that comes to grips with the ways in which existing anthropocentric religious worldviews contribute to environmental destruction. Her ecological work searches for social justice through transforming hierarchical structures that legitimize the oppression of the natural world and the marginalised, together with increased ecological awareness. Relatedly, Spretnak raised the question of how to address ecological ethics in a consumerist society that is unaware of how human behaviour contributes to the "ecocrisis" (Spretnak, 1990: 3). As opposed to dualistic and hierarchical

conceptualisations, nascent interrelating and all-embracing notions between the divine-earth-human relationships were envisioned. Ecofeminist theologies begin by refuting the dualistic thinking that underpins the logic of domination. This, they argue, is necessary for transforming theologies to arise. In the Co-Spirando network in Chile, Judith Ressa (1996: 51-60) has worked with *mestiça* women in relativizing Christianity by dismantling dualism and embracing indigenous roots. Relatedly, Gebara aims to dismantle the forms of domination that stem from patriarchal thinking by resituating the human within, and not above, the cosmos (1993), effectively deconstructing the paradigm that privileges male over female, mind over body, heaven over earth, transcendent over immanent.

### ***Patriarchy, Androcentrism and Anthropocentrism***

Ecofeminist philosophers have identified patterns of domination towards women and nature traversing patriarchy, androcentrism and anthropocentrism (Eaton, 2001: 77). According to Eaton (2005:41), it has been liberating to ecofeminist theologians to learn 1) that varying social constructions of domination underpin all patriarchal civilizations; 2) that patriarchy has assumed forms of androcentrism or male-supremacy;<sup>33</sup> and 3) that there is a correlation between androcentrism and anthropocentrism. In light of this information, ecofeminist theologians have developed strategic proposals for the emancipation of women and nature. Some theologians have moved beyond simplistic discussions, for example pertaining to whether a female ruler of society would have offered (or could potentially offer) a more benevolent and egalitarian mode of rule. Instead, by exposing the anthropological nature that all theological constructions are subjected to, ecofeminist theologians have constructed theologies that refute any form of belief or readings from sacred scripture that understand man to be biologically or inherently superior to woman as well as humanity as essentially superior to nature. The early work of feminist theorists on patriarchy contributed to the ways in which ecofeminist theologians debunk patriarchal theological thinking by forging alternative religious anthropologies, where humanity is resituated as part of the cosmos and women and men have equal relationships to God. Ecofeminist

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<sup>33</sup> Although ecofeminists have exposed that forms of patriarchy might differ in varying contexts, they have also pointed out that usually those variations occur due to the power dynamics among men. While elite males have been responsible for perpetuating patriarchal ruling, there are those men who are considered inferior to other men based on “education, class, race, sexual identity or religion” (Eaton, 2005: 41). Men are, however, never inferior to women. These forms of intra-gender oppression have consequently determined the ways that man’s positionality influence male-female relationships.

theological anthropologies have emerged in ways that aims to pave the way for women's redefinitions of self. In rejecting biological reductionism and relativizing religious truths, some ecofeminist theologians hope to shake the foundations on which patriarchy has been constructed.

One of ecofeminisms main challenges is how to envision new cultural and social practices without perpetuating intertwined forms of dualism. If we are to understand that dualistic-hierarchical thinking permeates cultural consciousness (Primavesi, 1992: 195-221) and shapes self-understanding and worldviews (Gebara and Bingemer, 1987: 1-19), then how are we to theologise in ways that disrupt this deep-seated paradigm? An alternative ecofeminist epistemology intertwined with sociological theories of knowledge is one of Gebara's main scholarly contributions to ecofeminist theology. Gebara, among others, has problematized how patriarchy and sexism are symbolically enacted in Western epistemology (1997b: 34-36). For Gebara (1997b), the combination of binaries and hierarchical thinking has given way to the construction of androcentric ways of knowing. Androcentric ways of knowing has gradually led to anthropocentric knowing, resulting in the ideology that only human (read: male) actions are important (1997b: 35). Gebara has also proposed knowing as "process", which in this context means continuity. For Gebara, ecofeminist epistemology must represent a constant dynamic work in process. Learning is a historical continuity. In this present moment in history, epistemology means producing knowledge that people can revisit, readapt or adjust in relation to their views about what it means to be human, and consequently their ways of knowing and learning. Gebara has called theologians to challenge any concept about human nature or non-human nature that erodes inclusive social structures. Ecofeminist epistemology and theology according to Gebara must be aimed to rebuild "a new balance that supports respect for all life" (1999b: 76).

Furthermore, ecofeminist historical investigations of the root-causes for women and nature domination have contributed to uncovering misogynist beliefs underlying the ethics of anthropocentrism. Merchant (1980) by critically analysing the shift from an organic to a mechanic and instrumentalist worldview, has found in the work of Francis Bacon, among others, misogynist views. From Merchant's perspective, Bacon has used a language to describe scientific progress that linked notions of violence and rape with the mastery over nature. Ecofeminist theologians from the Global North and South have since questioned "whether nature is devalued by virtue of a perceived association with women, or the reverse" (Eaton, 2005: 44).

By deliberating on the latter, ecofeminist theologians have provided alternative biblical interpretations about the natural world by finding new partners for hermeneutics' source. For example, in Christianity Eleanor Rae (1994), Gebara (1999b), Primavesi (2000), and Eaton (2001), among others, have argued that theology and science must be in a constant dialogue. Gebara, by restoring to theological discussion natural processes of evolution, affirms the freedom of all beings by debunking oppressive patriarchal theologies that have taught dualistic and hierarchical concepts as divine revelation and universal natural law (Gebara, 1999b: 99). A more unified vision of reality and anthropology requires that we put to rest anthropocentric religious beliefs about the earth and acknowledge the evolutionary process of all beings (1999: 22). If benevolent and holistic notions that connect humans and nature become embodied, new ways to understand the natural environment will emerge.

For many ecofeminist theologians, the re-reading of sacred scriptures through an ecological lens, the discussion of human stewardship responsibilities, and the rethinking of sacraments are all important interventions for the development of ecological theologies within the Christian tradition. However, through these approaches, the patriarchal religious framework is not necessarily challenged or altered. Heather Eaton calls this approach a "tradition-centred approach" (2005: 73). Contrasting this approach are the ecofeminist theologians who understand that in order to have a theology based on benign human and human-earth relations, core tenets of their religious traditions must be transformed. Hence, it is not enough to see the ecological crisis as an addendum to the list of religious concerns. Rather, it is vital to develop a completely new hermeneutical understanding where the fundamental human-earth-divine relationship becomes *locus*. These latter Christian ecofeminist theologians, such as Primavesi (2000) and Rae (1994) are engaged in the development of a more radical form of doing theology, namely, what Heather Eaton calls the "earth-centred approach," where the earth and its evolution becomes the primary realm of revelation (2005: 74).

### ***Biological Reductionism***

Western feminist theorists' insight have critically exposed women's identity as based on their reproductive system, and have contested the ideology of social reproduction on the grounds of social constructionism (Hare-Mustin and Marecek, 1994: 52-53). Ecofeminist scholars that were inspired by these notions, such as Ynestra King (1990), have not only proposed liberating

notions that free women's identity from biological reductionism. King (1990) has also argued for the construction of liberating views about men's identity and biological sex. In explaining that "women have been *historically* positioned at the biological dividing line where the organic emerges into the social", <sup>34</sup> King (1990: 116) has defended the view that women's and men's experiences have been subjected to social constructions. Gebara (2000b: 173-185; 2000c: 23-25) has similarly argued that in order to effectively implement a transformative ecological ethic, it must be recognized that men and women are equally embedded in the natural world. In other words, men have also been limited by the impositions caused by a dualistic-hierarchical worldview (Gebara, 2002a: 7-29). The redefinition of *human* identity is thus part of the new dialectical dynamic between male and female, where the space is open for hybrid identities to form. According to Merchant (1996: 17-18), the biological and reproductive differences between male and female are not ignored: they are instead recognized through the view that both women and men are capable of participating in an ecological ethic based on caring and nurturing. Ynestra King similarly argues that ecofeminist egalitarian thinking must also include a critique of the ways through which men have been distanced from nature (1990: 116-118).

It is the embodied woman as social historical agent, rather than a product of natural law, who is the subject of ecofeminism...An ecological feminism calls for a dynamic, developmental theory of the person—male *and* female—who emerges out of nonhuman nature, where difference is neither reified nor ignored and the dialectical relationship between human and nonhuman nature is understood. (King, Y., 1990: 117)<sup>35</sup>

A similar position has been voiced by Susan Prentice (1988) while critically engaging with spiritual ecofeminist essentialist views. Prentice has asserted that whether or not the interconnectedness of all life and the women-nature biological link are seen as liberating for some, this view has certain significant ethical implications. For example, how is it possible to realistically envision a genuine social and ecological transformation if men's harmful treatment of the planet is understood as irreversible? If it is through a natural affinity that women can learn how to bond with the earth and transform their anthropocentric behaviours, and men lack this natural affinity with the earth, it becomes difficult to admit and believe that men can also

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<sup>34</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>35</sup> Emphasis added.

develop an ethic of caring for nature (Prentice, 1988: 9-10). Ruether has asked what would become of a society that does not provide a space for adult men to reconstruct their identity in a responsible manner (Ruether, 1992: 17). This is not to say that it has become ecofeminists' responsibility to construct a new identity for men. Neither is ecofeminist theologians' notion of a just society born out of a reversal of patriarchy. Rather, ecofeminism must provide an inclusive and holistic view of all social and ecological dimensions or else it might become a form of "cultural escapism" (Ruether, 1996: 7).

## **2.6 Ecofeminist Political Praxis**

In the academic intersection with ecofeminism, Eaton has explained that ecofeminist scholars have been mostly active in advancing ecofeminism at the level of conceptualisation and theoretical engagements (2005: 17). While theories, hypotheses and historical investigations have a fundamental role to play in ecofeminist studies, the desire to forge an egalitarian society has inspired some theologians in this field to argue for an ecofeminist critique that is more connected to women's daily experiences. This is in order to develop an ecofeminist ethical praxis capable of fostering concrete change and commitment on all levels of life. A growing concern for the need to bridge gaps between theory and practice has been voiced by different scholars (see Peterson, 2001; Eaton, 1998; Gebara, 2010b). Although the need for a transformative ecological awareness is not a new argument within the ecological, ecotheological and ecofeminist theological discourses, what is new within these movements is the recognition that while much has been said, there still remains much to be changed at the practical and material levels. In the *Sustainability Workshop* hosted by the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting in 2012, Gebara named this gap, "pollution". She explained that ecotheologies and ecological theories are allowing their work to become polluted by spending more time on scholarly debates instead of paying closer attention to the multi-layered realities that people experience.<sup>36</sup> Gebara argued that social and theological ecologists generally only persuade people to learn about alternative ecological ethical behaviours. However, if those same ecologists' talk is reflected in their walk—this would create a discussion around personal

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<sup>36</sup> In *Teologia Ecofeminista* (1997b) Gebara points out that scholarly ecological and ecotheological critique often remains very superficial. For example, it is rare that a study points out the links between the bad qualities of vegetables been sold in poor suburbs with the contamination of soil or water (1997b: 15).

lifestyle changes, and the relationship between theory and practice. Furthermore, Gebara argued that those interested changes must speak a language that can be translated to people's real needs. For Gebara, this language must be constructed in light of the particularities of each respective context.

In "At the Intersection of Ecofeminism and Religion: Directions for Consideration" (2001), Eaton asserted the urgency in developing an ecofeminist theology that is "sufficiently comprehensive to be of genuine transformative value" (2001: 75). Eaton insists that the different ways in which the women-nature nexus is manifested across the world must be foregrounded within all ecofeminist approaches. For Eaton, ecofeminist theorists must serve as the principal interlocutors of ecofeminist theology in order to sufficiently problematize the constructions of religious anthropology and understandings of the environment. Ecofeminist theologians need also to theologize in continuity with historical processes while grounded in the material and empirical levels of the problem (Eaton, 2001: 90). Eaton is a key scholar in advancing ecofeminist religious theories, and has made a particularly strong impact on Christian discussions. She has argued for the development of an ecofeminist political praxis (see Eaton, 2001: 76-91). Here, political praxis represents the enhancement of ecofeminist theology by entering into a deeper and constant dialogue with liberationist theories. Eaton explains,

The critical relationship between theory and practice is a central preoccupation of feminist and liberation theories; meaning, a commitment to concrete changes in a situation that will contribute to liberation at all levels of experience. This requires a consciousness of the highly mediated dialectic of and dynamic interplay between theory and praxis. It is this dialectic that requires attention in the intersection of ecofeminism and religion. (Eaton, 2001: 77)

Eaton's proposal to develop "an awareness of the political dimension of theory" within ecofeminist theology resonates with similar objectives in most feminist liberation theologies emanating from the Global South, and particularly Latin America. As such there is an appeal to the practical property of consciousness, commitment and theory to be explicitly part of the theological discussions.

Eaton believes that a praxis-oriented methodology in ecofeminism will restore two important ideals. First, ecofeminist theologians must orient their theological goals by listening to



peoples' daily experiences of oppression while investigating the underlying issues that are causing these forms of oppressions. Second, they must work in re-interpreting God-talk in ways that re-position "the ethical core to the centre of theology" (2001: 78). Nonetheless, Eaton points out that the processes of developing new ethical paradigms equipped to address current ecological issues is a slow process (2001: 86). Still, while scholars are attending to the re-adjustment of their methods, "the accelerating ecological crisis and the strained material relationships between women and the natural world intensifies" (Eaton, 2001: 90).

At the centre of this conundrum is the question on strategy and the possible ways to move forward together. For some ecofeminists and feminist theologians the necessity of constructing theology in global contexts through North-South dialogue is no longer a proposal, it is a matter of logic and responsibility. In 1996, Ruether envisioned a platform where ecofeminist theologians could broaden their horizons of understanding by entering into deeper dialogue with ecofeminist theologians in the Global South. She pointed out that while women in the North had successfully achieved their basic right to health, women in the South were still claiming their basic needs. Eaton (2001), similarly argued that the ecofeminist connections were still only concepts, and will remain so if the political side of religion is not brought into the centre of the debate. One approach to respond to this issue has been the inclusion of insights from liberationist theologies. The paradox here is that many feminist theologians have challenged liberation theology's inability to bring liberation to women and to the earth. It is here that Gebara's ecofeminist liberation theology emerges as significant as well as innovative. Thus, it is logical to unpack Gebara's scholarly work and ecofeminist theology as a way to address the gap between experience and practice. Notwithstanding the fact that most of her writings are not translated into English, Mary Grey has pointed out that "it is time to hear from those writing directly out of their own struggles, and not from those of us trying to include their voices" (Mary Grey in Eaton, 2001: 91).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has first drawn attention to the dialogical dynamics of women who have worked on the intersections of feminism, ecology and religion from the Global South and North. Attention has been given to the different ways that the ecological crisis has impacted global women's lived experiences at the material level. Women's differing needs are clearly shaped by their particular

socio-economic contexts, but they also share a common struggle for the emancipation of women and the earth. During the 1970s, it became clear to women activists and academics the need to work together in order to change the current forms of oppression. In light of the experiences of Southern women, it was argued by Northern ecofeminist scholars that in order to forge local social transformation, the interconnected material-ecological issues that women in the South undergo must be central to the ecofeminist discourse. In very simple terms this is so because in the North ecological damage and consequential issues are not always so immediate or visible. In Mellor's words "it lurks in the air and the ground and, although its effects can be felt, particularly in health problems such as the rapid increase in asthma, the cause is difficult to prove and the sense of risk is therefore more diffuse" (Mellor, 1997: 25).

With the emergence of ecofeminist theory, scholars began seeking for the root-causes of the women-nature connection. While it has never been precisely argued how domination emerged, ecofeminists are certain that domination has been manifested as a mode of relationship throughout the world. In the process of constructing an ecofeminist worldview it also became clear that across the world "there is some form of a women/nature nexus that deeply influences beliefs, attitudes and actions" (Eaton, 2005: 37). However, it is not always clear to what extent environmental problems and women's oppression are connected to the women-nature connection. The growing awareness that there are different forces that caused oppression towards women and nature contributed to the development of the following claim: the hierarchical-dualistic understanding of the world has been grounded in the logic of domination, expressed in the different forms of oppression in society.

Secondly, this chapter drew attention to the ecofeminist religious discourse, with a specific focus on Christianity. The proposal of forging a political ecofeminist praxis, as articulated by Eaton, emerges from the recognition that oppression manifests differently within diverse social contexts according to their own particularities. For Eaton it is possible for global ecofeminism to develop a praxis that is political at its very core. Independently of the socio-cultural context or religious orientation, an ecofeminism that is political is undeniably about liberation.

In this light, the ecofeminist trajectory, which brought women from across the globe together in order to campaign against the crisis of modernity, challenges us to make sense and take advantage of this historical development. The oppressions that women experience are partly

a result of localized processes and partly due to global processes, and from the dialectical processes between them. While past decisions have set in motion the current ecological crisis, it is in contemporary times that the destructive consequences manifest. This is to say that nowadays, society, and by default ecofeminists, have an even bigger responsibility with respect to the next generations. It also points to the fact that if current social dynamics are partially a result from historical processes then the political praxis been constructed by ecofeminist theologians will likewise take shape, but rather as a force in forging social changes and alternative biocentric realities.

Here, I want to draw attention to some points that, in my reading, link ecofeminist theory and theology emerging from the Global North and South, and postcolonial theory. In *Ecofeminism* (1993), Shiva and Mies (from the South and North respectively) developed an integrated socio-economic ecofeminist analyses where they made the connection that although science, technology and capitalism were Northern constructs, their development took place and shape while being built on the colonization of others. This insight is also reflected in the Comaroff's (2012) views on the construction of modernity. As discussed in chapter one, for the Comaroffs, modernity is better understood as a North-South collaboration, "a world-historical production—albeit a sharply asymmetrical one" (2012: 7). Their certain common denominator is that both are part of a "world-historical process" (2012:6). Simply put, the Global North and South we know today are the result of a dialectical relationship between localized and globalized socio-cultural processes and relationships. This thesis resonates with central arguments raised by Gebara's "knowing as process," which foregrounded her anthropological proposal in relativizing Christianity (1999b). However, Gebara was also inspired by the panentheistic views from Northern scholars such as ecotheologian Sally Macfague and geologist Thomas Berry. She brought to the Latin American context the idea of the human as a being-in-relationship. Gebara was, however, primarily occupied with the experiences of marginalized women, and by being under the influence of her own academic and contextual historical process understood that the human being, due to the nature of continuous relationships, can only know what has been revealed through this complex and partial historical process. For Gebara, to embrace knowing as process was liberating. It is as a product from different and simultaneously similar social and cultural forces that she proposes an ecofeminist perspective that is based on today's experiences and needs.

The notion of being part of a process is what we all have in common. The very experience of being in a world process and in being-in-process emerges as a source for the advancement of an ecofeminist political praxis. The ways of knowing and being-in-the-world have always been central points of theological discussions, but now it is also political for ecofeminist theologians who are engaged in developing knowledge that impacts human behaviour. In this light, I argue that perspectives from religious ecofeminisms are informative and transformative to the development of an ecofeminist political praxis, which extends to a process of ethical self-reflection informed by global realities. In other words ecofeminism is about a shared project of emancipation for women and earth, but in dialogue with the ways that life is experienced in each and every context. This is a strategy of emphasising particularity in order to achieve plurality. It is here that Southern ecofeminist theology, and specifically Gebara's work, emerges as a by-product of this global historical processes, and Gebara stands out as an active historical subject who can offer insights to fruitfully advance the political ecofeminist goals. Gebara's theological trajectory, underwritten by the embodied processes of her own scholarly works, enables a political ecofeminism that narrows the gap between theory and practice.

## CHAPTER 3

### A HISTORY OF RESISTANCE

#### Introduction

This chapter is about Gebara's praxis-oriented methodology, inspired by her involvement in liberation theology in the 1960s and 1970s. Liberation theology importantly emphasised the need 'to do' theology in ways that spoke to the actual realities of the formerly colonized peoples of Latin America. The reality of poverty, in particular, constituted the backdrop of liberation theologians critique of the Catholic Christian tradition and dominant economic systems in Latin America. Gebara (2001) illustrated the importance of this socially engaged approach by stating that the poor "are the thermometers of the world at all levels" (2001: 237).<sup>37</sup> For Gebara, a praxis-oriented method must always be open to enter into dialogue with shifting realities. For this reason, I have called her praxis-oriented methodology *on-the-move*.

Gebara recognizes and accepts that our reference points are always limited and relative. It is by embracing these limitations that she proposes new constructive, fluid and organic perspectives. For the purpose of advancing an ecofeminist liberation theology it seems that a socially engaged methodology nourishes the idea of being in constant development, evolving and adapting according to different contextualized needs and realities. It is in view of the global ecofeminist aims of empowering women from within their own cultural and ecological contexts that this chapter aims to foreground the theological processes that led Gebara to reconfigure liberation theology's hermeneutic lens. Gebara's praxis-oriented method allowed her to recognize unseen forms of oppression within her own context. It is however, her constant openness to transformation that appears to keep this organic process alive. It is important to note that although Gebara's theology has transformed over time, her transitions always retained a core liberationist goal. Gebara has consistently implemented a praxis-oriented methodology, believing that such an approach is the only one that can be versatile enough to affect social change. This approach led Gebara to integrate gender analysis and ecological perspectives into her liberationist framework.

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<sup>37</sup> My own translation from the original in Spanish.

There is a pattern within liberation theology of approaching yesterday's understanding of history and scripture in order to illuminate today's experience and, therefore, today's truth. For example, liberation theologians' re-interpretation of Latin America's history since colonial times has been one of the principal ways through which to analyse the present socio-economic reality. Uruguayan liberation theologian Juan Luis Segundo (1987) explained that the use of social science methods for the study of social reality was adopted by liberation theologians as a mediating discourse in order to enrich theological notions. Additionally, such an approach enabled liberation theologians to continuously refine their critique against capitalism. Gebara, among others, believe that the reconstruction of socio-cultural meanings via liberationist theological discourses that are inclusive of multi-layered forms of oppression, has the potential to transform current asymmetrical power-relations (Gebara, 2003c: 171).

This chapter starts by introducing the historical contexts that paved the way for the emergence of liberation theology. There are several publications which map the development of liberation theology, among them, Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff's *Introducing Liberation Theology* (1987), which explain the basic questions central to liberation theology in Latin America. Their work is premised on the notion that faith and politics are related. Ivan Petrella's *The Future of Liberation Theology: An Argument and Manifesto* (2004) contends that liberation theology is as much relevant for today's global socio-economic context as it was during the 1970s in the Latin American context. Indeed, he argues for "the refashioning of liberation theology for a new century" in order to liberate the 'global' poor (2004: vii). This section explores those basic tenets of liberation theology that are important for Gebara's work. It is in order to give a background of how these tenets emerged that this section has been proposed.

Secondly, the work developed by women liberation theologians during the 1970s and 1980s is discussed in order to illustrate how the experiences of marginalised women influenced Gebara's proposal to expand the liberationist view of the poor as a category for theological analysis. Here, I also foreground selected stories from Gebara's autobiography that illuminate the development of her methodology. Third, in "Itinerario Teológico: Una Breve Introducción,"<sup>38</sup> Gebara (2001: 236) defined her theological methods as oriented by the immediate needs of the people. This 'theology of the immediate' requires particular attention as it renders visible the connections between human experience and theological practice. Gebara seeks to develop

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<sup>38</sup> This title translates from Spanish as "Theological Itinerary: A Brief Introduction".

theology by asking about its function and its meaning for the *agora* (now). Hence, this section also analyses the political significance of the notion of *agora*, which sparked Gebara's search for a more elaborate cultural analysis than what was proposed by liberation theology. Fourth, the emergence of feminist liberation theology is analysed by positioning its development as part of Latin America's history of resistance. Lastly, this chapter will discuss some insights for the enhancement of global ecofeminist theology and its attempt to develop a shared political lens.

### **3.1 Liberation Theologies**

The search for women's liberation from gender discrimination and inequality has been one of the central concerns of Latin American feminist liberation theologians. Investigating the roots of gender injustice, Latin American feminist liberation theologians contributed extensively to the development of theoretical and political feminist theologies pertaining to decolonizing women's inferior position in society. Feminist liberation theology is situated within the larger context of Latin American liberation theology. However, the trajectories of liberation theology and feminist liberation theology, respectively, resulted in disagreements on core concepts, particularly on the means and methods to achieve liberation. According to queer liberation theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid, feminist liberation theologians exposed the paradoxes and patriarchal fabric of liberation theologians' perspectives, and critiqued their lack of engagement with "ideological apparatuses beyond the field of political economy" (Althaus-Reid, 2009: 9).

#### ***Latin American Historical Contexts and Liberation Theology***

Latin American liberation theology is a movement that emerged in the mid-1960s. During that time Latin American countries were undergoing political and economic crises. As a response to the poverty and hardship caused by the oppressive economic system, theologians from various Latin American countries pioneered a unique way of theologizing. Their theology was essentially a critical response to the struggle experienced by the millions of marginalized human beings—the impoverished.

The crisis that Latin American countries were faced with was, according to Leonardo Boff (1988), the complex result of neo-colonial domination resulting from the implementation of development projects. Boff explains that after the independence of most countries, development and improved well-being were the effects expected from democracy and industrialization.

However, in reality, “since external exploitation continued through the economic neo-colonialism of the industrialized nations coupled with internal exploitation by the oligarchies and bourgeoisie, associated with the interests of multinational capital” (Boff, L., 1988: 4) the exacerbation of poverty and classism ensued. The increased structural economic dependency<sup>39</sup> in Latin America escalated inflation and national debt, while unemployment rates intensified due to expanding population. Gebara (2003c) critically observed that despite the novelty of this form of colonization through development, the same patterns of oppression continued to surface through these development projects. Practices of slavery, underpayment of workers, and the exploitation of natural resources continued to exist, albeit under the banner of “development” rather than colonization.

During the 1960s, it became clear for some Latin American economists and sociologists that the type of industrialization taking place in Latin America was not advancing development in society. The evident lack of concern in meeting the basic human needs propelled economists and sociologists to articulate a theory that revealed Europe and North America’s economic interest in prolonging dependency between the countries via “development” projects (Dussel, 1976: 139-145; Gibellini, 1987). Liberation theologians such as Enrique Dussel (1976: 140) and Rosino Gibellini (1987: 6) argue that an “epistemological rupture in the sphere of the social sciences” (Gibellini, 1987: 6) took place after 1964, as the theory of dependence was developed and put forward by Raul Prebisch, André Gunder Frank, Celso Furtado, Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Theotonio dos Santos. The basis for this poignant perspective rests on the notion that,

Latin America is not in a retarded state of underdevelopment, so that an organic system of aid from developed countries could help it to evolve towards the stage of development, indeed into a state of structural equilibrium: the underdevelopment is the by-product of the development of the developed countries. The underdeveloped peoples are in a state of “dependence” – and not in a relationship of interdependence – which cannot be overcome with a linear and gradual process of development. (Gibellini, 1987: 6)

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<sup>39</sup> For more information with respect to economic dependency, see Eduardo Galeano’s *The Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* (1973).



According to Dussel (1976: 140-141) this was the beginning of the liberationist discourse. The idea of liberation became the expression of the “inescapable element of radical change which is foreign to the ordinary use of the term development” (Gutiérrez, 1972: 52). A growing attitude of dissent towards the “pattern of dependent development” fuelled revolutionary movements together with a vision of a Latin America freed from colonizing development (Ruether, 2008a: 15). A form of democratic socialism was suggested as an alternative to the unbridled capitalism of the United States and Europe. The emerging social movements sought transformations that would genuinely meet the basic needs of the people, such as food, education, health services, creation of jobs, and housing.

The struggle for liberation from imperialist capitalism increased during the 1960s through various popular movements organized by men and women, from grassroots to student organizations at universities, peasants and labour unions, religious groups and all sorts of solidarity groups. At times some of these groups were involved in armed warfare and uprisings.<sup>40</sup> The Cuban revolution opened a new political horizon and it was seen by many as a model for decolonization and socialism (Gutiérrez, 1979: 6). Revolutionaries, such as Che Guevara and Colombian Catholic priest Camilo Torres, became popular heroes and symbols of hope. These revolutionaries, and others, provoked a negative response from the United States. In rejecting non-capitalist approaches and responses to solve the problems of poverty, the United States fostered a complex context of political oppression represented by military regimes within Latin America from the 1960s through the 1980s. By claiming the need to establish security and order, so-called “national security states” were strategically implemented. Ruether describes these military regimes as “a kind of colonial fascism, dependent on foreign aid from neo-colonial centers of power, which acts as a conduit for economic exploitation on behalf of the interests of these outside powers” (2008a: 15-16).

It was in the midst of this complex background that some Latin American Catholic theologians became involved with the revolutionary popular movements of the 1960s and, in solidarity with the poor, developed a theology in dialogue with the present liberationist discourse and sociological theories and analytical lenses, with notable influence from Marxism.<sup>41</sup> Informed

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<sup>40</sup> See Pablo Richard’s *Death of Christendoms, Birth of the Church* (1987) for more information on the popular movements in Latin America.

<sup>41</sup> See Enrique Dussel’s *History and the Theology of Liberation* (1976) for a thorough engagement on the origins and development of the liberation theology movement.

by their social reality, these theologians argued that classical Christian theology did not respond to the oppressed people's most basic human needs, and consequently, developed a new socially engaged Christian theology where the notion of liberation was situated at the core of religious belief and practice.

### ***Liberation Theology Basic Tenets***

In dialogue with critical and sociological analysis of socio-economic and political contexts, liberation theologians asserted that Christianity should be liberating and not oppressive, and liberating ethical practices should be carried into the spiritual as well as the social sphere. From a liberation theological perspective, Christianity's responsibility was not only to provide spiritual guidance to the poor, but also to find ways to help the population fulfil their physical needs. Along this line of thinking, liberation theology fought to unify the split between spirit and matter, so prevalent in dominant theological work in the Christian tradition. Liberation theologians re-interpreted the Christian faith and raised questions about how to speak about God and God's love in the midst of injustice, hunger and misery. Their methods became a critical reflection on the need to develop theological praxis in a context of oppression.

The cause of the poor, voiced by liberation theology, represented a commitment to redress historical injustices and restore social equality. In investigating the root-causes of economic oppression, liberation theologians began recognizing that patterns of conflict and resistance were intrinsically related to religious interests from the colonial time to the present. The so-called evangelization of the Americas was clearly entwined with the economic interests of colonizing powers. In other words, European economic ideology pervaded the orientation of the Christian theology that was brought to Latin America. This awareness laid the foundation for critique against the indifference of the Catholic Church towards the material suffering of the poor, and prompted liberation theologians to reconstruct Christian principles in light of the experiences of the Latin American Christian population.<sup>42</sup> Due to their view that European Christian theology reflected the experiences and perspectives of the colonial powers, a theological polarization between North and South began taking shape (Dussel, 1976: 116). In effect, Christianity in Latin America took two courses: one recognized by the official Catholic

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<sup>42</sup> In *The Liberation of Theology* (1977), Juan Luis Segundo develops a theological proposal freed from colonial ideologies.

Church and another marginalized by the Catholic Church. The theology of the latter is generally subscribed to by the majority of the population, however, frequently expressed through a hybrid form of religiosity that is partly the result of the evangelization of the Americas during colonial times and partly an attempt to restore religious identity by the colonized people.

In analysing colonial history, Gebara and Bingemer have pointed out that Iberian Catholicism was viewed by its practitioners as the only way to salvation and entry into heaven. Hence, the style and the language of the conquest, demonstrated by the warlike and combative nature of Iberian Catholicism, set a hostile tone towards any culture or religion that was not Christianity (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 129). Gebara (2003c: 170-171) argued that the social dynamics resulting from the dialectical process between colonization and evangelization have reverberated throughout the centuries in Latin America. This is to clarify that, at the same time that the European colonizers laid the foundations of a complex hierarchical socio-economic structure, the Catholic Church was covering the landscape with numerous dioceses and churches. This, in turn, shaped a social context where religion became progressively intertwined with people's daily reality, taking on the paradoxical roles of guide and colonizer, comforter and oppressor, educator and suppressor of innovation (Gebara, 2010b: 204-205). In other words, Latin American history is characterized by a pattern of conflict and resistance, intertwined with religious experiences, from colonial times to current contexts.

Gustavo Gutiérrez (1972) proposed a theology of liberation by engaging the historical praxis of liberation as witnessed in the lives of some early missionaries, such as Spanish Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas.<sup>43</sup> Gebara and Bingemer (1987) analysed the religious forms of resistance emerging during the colonial history of Mexico. More specifically, they interpreted the increased devotion to *Our Lady of Guadalupe* as an attempt of the colonized "other" to reclaim their role as historical subjects. For Gebara and Bingemer the centre of indigenous people's religious cosmology, the deity of the Mother-Goddess (*Tonantzin*)—supplanted by altars dedicated to the Virgin Mary—was reclaimed by the people and merged into Christian teachings. Guadalupe, which took such deep roots and different forms of expression

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<sup>43</sup> Bartolomé de Las Casas is commonly viewed by liberation theologians as one of the first prophets in Latin America. According to Burkholder and Johnsons (2010: 45), Las Casas, who had witnessed the devastation of the Caribbean Islands, "angrily excoriated, in an endless stream of publications, his compatriots' abuse of the natives and pushed the Crown toward reform." In Bartolomé de Las Casas's *Short account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1542), he expresses his horror about the Spanish conquerors inhumane butchering of the indigenous people (in Hughes, et. al. 2007: 281-284).

throughout the Latin American context, is actually a religious symbol of resistance and a local expression of Christianity. In this way, the struggle for liberation, rooted in the experiences of oppression of the colonized people, inspired a political theological practice. The Christian population was not being taught to reject the Christian faith, but to reclaim it and to take charge of the already existing forms of political faith.

For Gebara, “[l]iberation was the very substance of all theology...liberation and theology should be correlative terms” (Gebara, 2002c: 52). Respectively, Gutiérrez stated,

The theology of Liberation offers us not so much a new theme for reflection as a *new way* to do theology. Theology as critical reflection on historical praxis is a liberating theology, a theology of the liberating transformation of the history of mankind and also therefore that part of mankind—gathered into *ecclesia*—which openly confesses Christ. (Gutiérrez, 1972: 15)<sup>44</sup>

Liberation theology revamped traditional theological hermeneutics while informed by particularly by Marxist theory. The poor/oppressed were positioned as the key to the hermeneutical *locus*. The “option for the poor” was explained by Gutiérrez (1972) as the primary framework for liberationist methodology. The commitment to the poor was a “commitment to the life cause, and struggle of the millions of debased and marginalized human beings” (Boff, L. and C., 1987: 3). Here, another basic tenet emerging from a political theology is expressed. Using Elina Vuola’s words: “The subjects of the epistemological rupture in LT are the *non-person*, the ones who are not totally valued as humans beings” (Vuola, 2002: 62). The concept of the non-person discussed from liberation theologians’ perspective aimed at establishing that understandings of personhood should always be reviewed in light of the concept of citizenship. In dialogue with Marxist critiques, liberation theologians problematized the issue of the non-person as one of the results of capitalist thinking. They rethought Christian anthropology in ways that would restore an awareness of inherent value and citizenship to the poor. From this perspective it was envisioned that the oppressed would more effectively fight for their basic rights and needs, as they would also understand that these rights are their *human* rights. The challenge of theology in the Latin American context was explained differently from modern

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<sup>44</sup> In the Spanish original text Gutiérrez refers to humankind as mankind, exposing the gendered connotation that exists in Spanish and English (emphasis in original).

Western theology, which was shaped by the challenges born from their engagements with the non-believer. According to Gutiérrez,

On a continent, like Latin America, the challenge does not come principally from the non-believer, but from the *non-person*. That is, from somebody whom the existing social order does not recognize as human: the poor, the exploited, the one who is systematically and legally deprived of his humanness (*su ser de hombre*), the one who hardly knows that he is a person. The non-person puts in question not so much our religious world as our *economic, political and cultural world*. (Gutiérrez, 1982: 77)<sup>45</sup>

In view of the above, liberation theology's approach to the bible proved that European traditional theology was non-responsive to the Latin American context. Instead, in the context of liberation theology, God became understood as always being on the side of the oppressed and always against the oppressor. For Gutiérrez, any person who calls themselves Christian in Latin America should advocate the cause of the poor (Gutiérrez 1983: 209). The concept of salvation, from a liberationist perspective, meant that salvation starts today and now, hence, liberation was salvation "from both personal sins committed and the social sins imposed" (De La Torre, 2008: 9). By social sin, liberation theologians named the institutionalized violence of poverty that perpetuated undignified human conditions (Ruether, 2008a: 17).

Hugo Assmann explains that liberation theology does not consist of a cohesive group of tenets that are shared by all due to the fact that "Latin America does not signify one single and well defined context." (1979: 133) Rather, a number of socio-political expressions and Christian norms form part of liberation theology. However, the praxis-oriented method and the experience of colonialism, constituted the primary lens through which liberation theologians questioned the socio-economic patterns of oppression and envisioned alternative readings of the bible.

The Uruguayan Jesuit, Juan Luis Segundo (1977), was perhaps the liberation theologian who wrote most extensively on the hermeneutics of liberation theology. According to Segundo, the key element for the interpretation of the bible and tradition is the hermeneutical circle. In Phan's words this is elucidated as, "the continuing change in our interpretation of the Bible which is dictated by the continuing changes in our present-day reality, both individual and

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<sup>45</sup> This is another example of Gutiérrez' use of gendered language. See Gutiérrez, 1982: 77. Quote's translation from Spanish by Elina Vuola, Spanish words between brackets by Vuola and emphasis in original.

societal...Each new reality obliges to interpret the word of God afresh, to change reality accordingly, and then to go back and reinterpret the word of God again, and so on” (Phan, 2000: 51). For Segundo, hermeneutics must begin by reflecting on the praxis of the poor, which will lead to the construction of theological thought that will insist on liberating praxis (Segundo, 1977). In this way, liberation hermeneutics distinguishes itself from the methodology employed by dominant classical theology, which begins with a theological ‘truth’ that gives way to doctrine, and subsequently scripture. The hermeneutical circle—seeing, analysis, and judgement (discernment) leading to action (praxis)—provides the theologian with a new viewpoint on culturally constructed truths and theories, and emphasize praxis.

The liberationist hermeneutical methodology radically worked on reconstructing core concepts within Christianity. For example, Ellacuría (2001a)<sup>46</sup> and the Boff brothers, among others, articulated that the notion of the Kingdom of God was better explained as the Reign of God. Furthermore, this Reign of God should be interpreted as a present event, moving beyond the belief that it is only an ahistorical occurrence. This view encouraged transformation by affirming history as a process in construction, instead of pre-determination (Ellacuría: 2001a 34-35; Boff, L. and C., 1987: 87-98). In addition, liberation theologians sought to restore the gospel’s credibility by teaching that the promise of an egalitarian, comradely world should not be a future utopian dream, but rather that people should work together today in making this an egalitarian and just world. Only then would it be “possible for God to ‘pitch a tent’ amongst ordinary men and women” (Boff, L. and C., 1987: 87-89; Ellacuría, 2001a: 23-24). These themes have been interpreted differently by various liberation theologians, but share the same goals of avoiding alienation in favour of humanization (Segundo, 1995: 318). From the perspective of liberation theologians, the reign of God appeals to the capacity-building structures of individuals in all aspects, including psychological, cultural, political, material, physical and spiritual (Libânio 1987: 142-147). Furthermore, the politician within this stream would not be confined to the action of the “professional politician” but would also reach out to each human being, in the search for humanization. This line of thinking does not limit itself to governmental actions, but to all human activities that concern the “unjust state of society” (Segundo 1997: 168).

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<sup>46</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría was perhaps the main male liberation theologian who discussed this idea of the reign of God. See “El Desafío Cristiano de la Teología de Liberación” (2001a: 19-33) and “Utopía y Profetismo desde América Latina” (2001b: 234-289). However, I argue that Gebara equally explored the notion of history as a process in construction. For Gebara, social practices have not been pre-determined by divine command, instead she teaches women to use their own agency in order to forge social changes.

The work of raising awareness among the poor and oppressed about their human rights and value rebuilt what liberation theologians believed to be the first impulses of Christianity, that is, the hope of having a future that would guarantee at least the minimal requirements for human dignity. Inspired by Jesus' life and message, theologians focused on providing resources to impoverished people in order to encourage the development of a full person (see Boff, L. and C., 1987; Gutiérrez, 2003a: 44-45). This standpoint was underpinned by a political agenda, as the disenfranchised were urged to come together in struggle for a more decent life, and thereby cease to be non-persons utilised by neoliberalist discourses.

### ***The Implementation of Political Theological Strategies***

The insertion of the concept of liberation into theology restored the revolutionary side of religion among the population. A desire for social change grew among some sectors of the Christian population. As shown above, central to this process were works that re-interpreted the message of Jesus, which invoked religious movements' resistance against the dominant oppressive powers. The cause of the poor provoked a fundamental change in the way the popular church saw itself, and it became known as the "Church of the poor" (Segundo, 1987: 144). For Segundo, "the Church of the poor signifies the Church of the class which has become aware of the requirements of the evolutionary struggle as a step towards liberation" (*ibid.*).<sup>47</sup> The work on developing awareness among the marginalized meant the development of a deeper understanding of human value.

The influential works of Paulo Freire (1967; 1971), introduced the concept of liberation to the pedagogical field. Freire (1971) proposed a methodological approach for a liberating education. He put forward a critical reading of reality via literacy. For Freire, literacy could be transformed to a practice of freedom via the popular movements for social awareness. Freire's methodology was an attempt to set in motion social transformation by means of cultural conscientization. Through this approach he greatly contributed to the advancement of the "*Comunidades de Base*"—Christian Base Communities (CBCs). The CBCs were physical locations where meetings were organised strategically to educate poor people and offer informal theological education. By engaging with their own social issues and empowered by critical

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<sup>47</sup> It is important to note that many liberation theologians, like Segundo, who were ordained priests or nuns and/or academics, would identify themselves in solidarity with the poor. This led to the use of the term "church of the poor" and signified the "awakening" of the masses, including their own political awakening.

awareness, people within the CBCs began to discover methods of resistance within their own religion. During the 1970s, while the military regime was dismantling civil society organisations and suppressing popular movements, the CBCs continued to be safe spaces where grassroots political actions were organized (De La Torre, 2008: 7). The CBCs were a phenomenon which spread throughout the Latin American continent. The sharing of experiences between the people participating in CBCs became a resource as well as a mirror for theological critical reflection, and people were learning how to read the scriptures by incorporating the standpoint of the poor.<sup>48</sup>

### **3.2. Positioning Feminist Theology in Latin America's Liberationist Context**

#### ***The 1970s***

Gebara (2001) narrates that during the 1970s women liberation theologians like herself were convinced that they were living in an historical moment where qualitative social changes were beginning to emerge. The liberationist discourse assisted male and female theologians to understand that religion was not separate from socio-historical processes (2001: 231). For Gebara, the practice of Christianity in Latin America became deeply connected to the struggle for justice and equality. To be part of the reign of God had to do with one's ability to share material goods and participate in the reorganisation of political powers. Gebara (2001: 231) states that her particular interest in the liberation theology emerged from the working class union groups and leftist peasant organizations. These collectives inspired her philosophical and anthropological works on all levels. 92

During the 1970s, while Gebara was teaching theology and philosophy at ITER (Institute of Theology in Recife), she greatly contributed to the development of the CBCs. Amongst other things, she was responsible for the theological foundation for community development projects that focused on promoting social change through educational programs. ITER, as the leading institute in Latin America promoting and advancing liberation theology, was certainly impacted by Gebara's work. Furthermore, she also contributed in the development of liberation theology and CBCs throughout the entire continent. However, her influence is often hidden in standard liberation theological narratives of the 1970s due to patriarchal biases. Under Gebara's direction,

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<sup>48</sup> See Ernesto Cardenal's three-volume compilation, *The Gospel in Solentiname* (1976; 1978 and 1979), where he collected the *campesinos'* commentaries and discussions on the Gospels, based on their worldview. Cardenal shows how people had simple and yet profound insights on the meaning of the bible as it applied to their reality.



ITER formed an interdisciplinary group called DEPA (Departamento de Pesquisa e Assessoria-Department of Research and Advice) in order to provide the laity living in the most distant rural areas with critical thinking skills from sociological and theological lenses. At the same time, she was invited to facilitate workshops and seminars across Latin America, promoting the political side of theology. Gebara says,

I was invited to lecture and speak in conferences aimed in teaching people how to shift their understanding that religion is not the ‘opinion of the people’. From liberation theology’s perspective, religion became rather an ally of the liberation movements that were fighting for land, agricultural reform, the struggle for housing, demanding fair wages and democracy (Gebara, 2001: 231).<sup>49</sup>

During the 1970s, men and women liberation theologians’ political activist initiatives inspired the reconstruction of biblical themes that would foster ideals of liberation. The Exodus, the captivity in Babylon, and the historical Jesus were discussed and emphasized throughout the CBCs. This, in turn, led women theologians and biblical specialists to address women’s historical silence and experience of discrimination (Gebara, 1995a: 208). According to Judith Ressa, women began seeing themselves as historical subjects, “capable of being protagonists of liberation” (Ressa, 2006: 9). This was the first step in raising feminist consciousness, though it lacked support from sophisticated feminist theories. Following the existing theological polarization, there was no dialogue between women liberation theologians in Latin America and feminist theologians in First World countries. There was also no dialogue with Latin American feminist movements. Feminism found fertile ground within women liberation theologians only during the mid-1980s. While Latin American feminists generally rejected religion or religious forms of feminism, women liberation theologians’ prejudices towards feminist movements were based largely on fears that the feminist movements could be yet another form of “imperialistic invasion from the North” (Ressa, 2006: 9). As such, feminist influence could potentially sidetrack poor women from their primary focus of fighting against “economic and political oppression as a *class*” (Ressa, 2006: 9). Argentinean queer liberation theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid argued that this resistance to develop a dialogue with Latin American and the

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<sup>49</sup> My own translation from the original in Spanish.

Northern feminism was fully supported by male liberation theologians, who had their own unacknowledged biased patriarchal agenda (Althaus-Reid, 2009: 13).

Because women liberation theologians were driven by liberationist ideals, their desire to prove women's full humanity, as well as to foreground their value as historical and biblical subjects, followed the liberationist hermeneutical methods. Selected texts were stressed in the hope of developing a new society based on socialist ideals and egalitarian relationships (Tamez, 1995: 79). They focussed on female characters in the Bible who also struggled with injustices and discussed women's leadership capabilities in the biblical tradition (Gebara, 1995a: 208). For example, from the Old Testament, Deborah, the judge, played a leadership role by organizing the Israelite army in a successful counterattack against the King of Canaan. Likewise, Judith defeats Holofernes, the Jewish people's oppressor, by using her blinding beauty (Gebara, 1992 [1987]: 36). Similarly, the book of Judith "is a parable of the victory of a frail people symbolized in the figure of a woman" (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 40).

Women theologians also elucidated the important role that women occupied as missionaries and preachers during the early years of the current era (Gebara, 2003a: 249-268). This process of reclaiming women's memories was a strategy to make women visible in society. It is important to note that even though women liberation theologians' contributions during the 1970s was an important step forward, the progress made was not enough to rupture dominant male discourses or empower women in certain contexts. Reflecting on the 1970s forms of feminist hermeneutics, Gebara (1995a: 208) notes that the feminist strategy of highlighting female leaders in biblical texts and historical narratives often had the effect of maintaining women's domestic roles, as women's leadership roles in the bible also was strongly connected to their role as mothers, wives and daughters. In this way, the efforts put forth by women liberation theologians backfired, causing them to fall back into the "patriarchal trap" (*ibid.*). In my view, it is important for global ecofeminist theologians to reflect on this historical process. The desire for political emancipation driven by the praxis-oriented method worked as a significant step in encouraging women to refuse to be invisible. This in return guided women theologians to another level of feminist awareness where they began rebuilding their identity free from male control. They had worked on creative ways to teach women's values and bring an end to oppression in their own contexts. The process for women's liberation had been set in motion and gradually a shift in consciousness began to emerge.

The following stories illustrate this process of shifting consciousness as a pattern in Gebara's life experiences. As noted previously, ITER was located in Recife, where there is a great deal of religious hybridization between African religious traditions and Christianity. This phenomenon was rarely noticed by the population and was denied by the Catholic Church. In *Águas do Meu Poço: Reflexões sobre Experiências de Liberdade* (*Waters from my Well: Reflections on Experiences of Liberation*, 2005a), Gebara narrated her own experiences in that social context as an intrinsic part of her own learning process. Her praxis-oriented method began uncovering a reality that had been overlooked by liberation theologians, including herself. Liberation theologians argued for a liberationist praxis that allows the individual to make connections between their own experienced realities and knowledge production. The exercise of self-analysis under a liberationist framework fostered social responsibility and critical thinking. This methodology was responsible for the development of transformational analytical tools throughout Gebara's own career. She never stopped learning. In approaching Gebara's learning process through her own lived experiences, the empowering effects of a praxis-oriented theology that is on-the-move is revealed. This approach to theology alerted her to the multi-layered levels of oppression experienced among the population. Her liberationist methods led Gebara not only to critically engage with her socio-economic context and re-read the Christian scriptures from a liberationist lens, but also to deconstruct knowledge from a liberationist theological perspective. She was able to discern the hidden forms of oppression that were naturalized through the history of patriarchal and hierarchical ideologies. The praxis-oriented method she proposed emerged as a hybrid product from the space where the dialectics between theory and practice were most visible, namely, among the outcasts of society.

On one occasion Gebara (2005a: 115-116) went to partake in the Holy Week celebrations of a rural community in the *sertão pernambucano* (the driest regions in Pernambuco, in the North of Brazil). On Good Friday, as was tradition in that community, no one went to sleep in order to partake in an entire night of praying. The men stay outside the church while all the women and children were praying and waiting for the sunrise to celebrate Jesus' resurrection from death. Gebara observed and admired the generous devotion in the midst of so much poverty. One elderly woman asked Gebara if she was going to pray and Gebara replied that she did not know that particular prayer. This woman then taught Gebara that if she would just start to move her lips, mimicking the sounds, then eventually she would learn the prayer. Gebara

realised that she could not attempt to understand this environment from her own life experiences. The prayers were mediating people's suffering. Gebara began praying with them. In that moment, she understood that the praying was a mechanism that functioned to ease their suffering, and that it was a restoration ritual in which people's hopes were renewed and comfort was obtained. Gebara understood that in their cosmology, God would allow certain problems to come and would help the problems go away. God was understood as always good and the injustices endured by the people did not contradict God's goodness. It was rather human limitations in understanding God's purpose for everything that was the obstacle.

Gebara realised the profound gap between her theology and the lived reality of this community, and recognised the inadequacies of her own theology. On a different level, she was confronted by liberation theology's difficulty in helping people from particular groups and to make the important connections between various aspects of life—such as economic, political and religious realities—and their own suffering. Gebara questioned whether the liberationist ideals were being effectively communicated to people living at the margins. Liberation theology's deliberations, although engaged with the reality of the poor, were also the result of debates among educated people. To reflect on this cultural gap has been one of Gebara's core concerns throughout her work. In other words, to listen to the poor and be aware of the ways in which cultural and economic ideologies affect their experiences and subject-positions, in different contexts, must be included in any theological reflection.

Similar to the experience relayed above, and yet in a totally different context, another episode happened in the urban centre of Recife. Gebara (2005a: 120-122) was invited to write the introduction to a book written by a folk writer. This writer interviewed a number of poor men who were part of the commerce industry and who habitually visited prostitutes in a house nearby. Nostalgic poems, experiences, stories, derisive jokes and a variety of descriptions of female genitalia were all part of this book. Gebara shared that the book was revelatory for her regarding gendered characteristics. She knew about *machismo* in Latin America, but from that book she learned about the different levels of the *machista* culture. The poor were not all one category, as she had learned before, and a poor man was much more valued than a poor woman. Gebara visited social spaces that probably most ascetic people and even theologians would not dare to visit. She agreed to write the introduction, on the condition that she could meet the prostitutes. She never told the women that she was a nun, as she wanted them to feel comfortable in her

presence. In meeting with the female prostitutes, Gebara started to understand the complexity of their situation. Because of the economic crisis, older prostitutes were losing terrain to the young ones who were perceived to be more desirable. A fifty-year-old prostitute shared that some nights she did not have enough clients to buy one plate of food. Gebara went to the hotel where the prostitutes used to see their clients just before they opened for business. There were women putting on make-up and nail polish, loud music was playing, people were running out of the shower, others were brushing their hair, all to get ready to start work. In the middle of that chaos, usually at six in the afternoon, everything and everyone stopped and the radio played *Ave-Maria* (Hail Mary). Some women began praying, while others showed respect and engaged in contemplation.

The religiosity that ruptures all socio-cultural contexts was once again revealed within the most unexpected environment. It was Mary, the all-embracing mother that had a special place where paradoxically human behaviour represented the antitheses to the depiction of Mary in traditional theology. The female prostitutes that Gebara met with did not question Mary's virginity and motherhood as the prototype for womanhood. They did not connect their own socio-economic subjugation to the idea of an oppressive divinity. Mary was always good: she was the forgiving mother that in Latin America holds a unique place among the population. The human need to ask for protection from a divinity was again revealed in a context of poverty that had not previously been considered by liberation theology.

On another occasion, Gebara (2005a: 119-120) visited a *mãe-de-santo do Candomblé*. *Candomblé* is a hybrid between Christianity and black-African religious traditions that were brought to Latin America with the slaves during the colonization. In the *Candomblé* tradition women are religious leaders, known as *mãe-de-santo*, "mother of saints". These women are seen as holders of great power due to their ability to contact the spiritual world, which is interlinked with the natural world.<sup>50</sup> Traditionally, *Candomblé* was prejudiced by Christianity and generally condemned as pagan/satanic by most Catholic priests and Evangelical pastors. Gebara described her mixed feelings during this visit and a type of apprehension or fear of the unknown. The room in which she waited to see the *mãe-de-santo* was filled with different altars, colourful candles, incense, different images of divinities, offerings from rituals—nothing that reminded Gebara of a

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<sup>50</sup> For more information on *Candomblé*, see Paul Christopher Johnson's *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods: The Transformation of Brazilian Candomblé* (2002); Beatriz Gois Dantas' *Nagô Grandma and White Papa: Candomblé and the Creation of Afro-Brazilian Identity* (2009).

Catholic church. Gebara told the *mãe-de-santo* that she would like to know who her guides or protectors were within *Candomblé*. The *mãe-de-santo* consequently performed a ritual that began by throwing shells, at the end it was revealed that *Iemanjá* was Gebara's protector. *Iemanjá* is believed to be the goddess of the oceans, the very essence of the water protecting all the mothers and children. The second protector was *Iansã*. *Iansã* is a warrior goddess, full of happiness, who likes gold. The religious pluralism in the *pernambucano* context challenged Gebara to reflect on the religious experiences of those from different traditions. Her meeting with *mãe-de-santo* was a singular experience that triggered questions about the symbolic representations of the divine and how many of Christianity's expressions of God that were based on men's experiences. She also reflected on the prejudice towards African religious traditions in Latin America, initially inherited from the colonial mentality of religious exclusivism, but continuously perpetuated even after independence. Clearly, there were still limitations with regard to religious pluralism. Experiences such as this have drawn Gebara's attention (2001: 232) to the importance of engaging multi-religious discourses for a democratic and egalitarian process. Gebara, by allowing alternative forms of knowledge and culture to transform her own understanding of the divine, has notably challenged the existing prejudices against hybrid religious expressions in Latin America.

### ***The 1980s***

During the 1980s, Latin America went through significant political changes. In most countries military systems were dismantled and replaced with elected civilian governments. Democracy was instituted and the capitalist economic systems emerged. However, foreign indebtedness drove recession, causing the economic situation to remain unbalanced and stagnant. Liberation theologians, in dialogue with some economists, sought to resist neoliberalism, the new global dominant power, on the basis of faith. Clodóvis Boff and George Pixley have critically accused neoliberalism for being the "great god Capital, creator and father of so many lesser gods: money, the free market, and so on" (1989: 144). For Gebara, the new dominant political and economic systems were not only causing new forms of economical oppression, but also revealed existing forms of cultural hierarchical oppression *at the margins*.

In "Educação Popular: Sementes de um Mundo Novo" (Popular Education: Seeds for a New World, 1982) and "Vida Religiosa e Educação Popular" (Religious Life and Popular

Education, 1984), Gebara began problematizing the issue of immediacy by referring to the culture of despair that functioned among the poor. Gebara pointed out the urgent need to respond to this cultural dynamic arising from the contexts of exacerbated poverty, where actions, behaviours and beliefs were determined by the population's immediate physical and material needs. She deliberated about what to do when the immediate material and physical needs became of uttermost importance. Gebara argued that many children and adults were no longer attending educational programs because they had to find ways to support their family. Gebara's involvement with the CBC's in the rural and underdeveloped areas of Brazil supplied first-hand information about the domestic oppressive realities. The word *fome* (hunger) had become the main theme within the CBCs' meetings and educational programs. The discussions around social changes or socially engaged ways to understand God and Jesus were supplanted by people's stories about "how they had nothing to eat yet" or "how their children were left hungry at home" (Gebara, 1992 [1984]: 10). "Hunger is the topic on everyone's mouth. You barely arrive at Sra Maria, Sra Zefinha or others and the topic is always the same: 'Today I have had not a chance to light the stove yet,' 'my boys are starving.' And only then it is possible to start talking about other things and later the conversation returns to hunger again, as if this was been the central theme of life" (1992 [1984]:10). The need to re-think the liberationist socio-cultural analysis was becoming increasingly evident for Gebara. Despite the efforts to raise social consciousness in order to empower the population to resist the oppressive political systems, the new economic reality of the 1980s provoked actions and reactions dictated by a new challenge: the immediacy of survival. The emerging "culture of the immediate" led people to shift their focus to basic needs, such as food and ways to obtain it (Gebara, 1982).

Theoretically and theologically, the reality of immediacy demonstrated the interconnected ways in which the capitalist system, by not respecting humanity, caused inhumane living conditions for all. Gebara suggested that these new forms of economic oppression also led to renewed religious dualistic thinking within the population. The population searched for religious responses to immediate relief and the context of suffering and the desire to feel protected led many people to re-establish their loyalties and faith to the Catholic saints and traditional religious practices. Many found immediate hope offered by traditional forms of dualistic theology that were particularly present within the new forms of Charismatic Catholicism and Pentecostalism (Gebara, 2003c: 172). "It [Charismatic Catholicism and

Pentecostalism] appeals to people's feelings and emotions, and to the various fears that plague people in an increasingly unstable world" (*ibid.*). For Gebara (2008a: 324-331; 2008b) the refashioned old rituals, symbols, prayers, and beliefs in a heaven free from suffering, brought immediate comfort to the oppressed, but consequently also a theology that did not bring liberation, nor fostered critical thinking among the population.

Gebara embarked on a cultural investigation of the more profound meanings underlying the actions and reactions produced by this culture of despair. This investigation was compounded by Gebara's interpretation of the re-emergence of old forms of religiosity as an attempt to appease suffering. It was, however, from her own experiences that she understood that any concept that obstructs the marginalised from seeking freedom has no place in a liberationist framework. The initial liberation theological charge that Christianity remained oblivious to the socio-economic reality of the poor, motivated Gebara to search for other forms of oppression resulting from hierarchical and dualistic thinking. Gebara argued that dualistic readings of the Bible, separating heaven and earth, were ingrained into the imagination of the poor (Gebara, 1991a: 12; 16-17). The actions and reactions supplanting the ideas and plans for tomorrow by the immediacy (*agora*)<sup>51</sup> of material needs were a manifestation of dualistic thought (Gebara, 1991a: 25). Theologically, God had been re-defined as siding with the poor and the idea of salvation had been re-interpreted as starting here and now. Yet, God was still understood as an all-knowing deity. God was perceived as good, and there was a divine purpose for everything. The context of immediacy did not contradict God's goodness, neither did liberation theology.

From Gebara's perspective (Gebara, 2003a), liberation theology did not help people to realise how their understanding of God was the actual obstacle. A religious anthropology that united heaven and earth had not yet been put forward.<sup>52</sup> The ways in which the population responded to their immediate needs was by searching for quick spiritual relief, reflective of the ways in which dualistic religious cosmology hinders human emancipation. The theological cosmology was still the same. God was still sovereign. Today's suffering would not exist in the heavens. Even though liberation theology was teaching that salvation and justice start today, the population searched for religious forms of immediate help and relief. Suffering, pain, mortality and death were not part of liberation theology's socio-economic analysis and contextual

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<sup>51</sup> In Portuguese, *agora* means now, immediately, at this moment.

<sup>52</sup> This theme will be further explored through chapter four.



theology. These concepts were to existential for liberation theologians who primarily were more concerned with the political struggle for land. Although liberation theology recognised that dividing matter from spirit forged the development of a hierarchical Christian theology, by maintaining the belief in a heaven free from suffering they did not assist the marginalized to deal effectively with the realities of their own mortality. Suffering and pain were overthrowing political faith.

### **3.3 Positioning Feminist Liberation Theology in Latin America's History of Resistance**

Latin American feminist liberation theology started as a result of the significant role that women played against the oppressive economic and political systems during the 1950s and 1960s (Tamez, 1996: 11). The liberationist discourse set in motion a process for emancipation for women theologians, and there was no going back. By embracing the principles of liberation theology, women theologians had however (unwittingly) embarked on a double struggle against economic and political oppression on the one hand, and the historical objectification of women as non-subjects on the other. By foregrounding their role as historical subjects as well as actors they developed a different theology than that articulated by mainstream liberation theology. During the 1980s a group of women liberation theologians started a dialogue with feminist movements from Latin America, in order to combat the patriarchal theologies that prescribed hierarchical gender roles. Despite ambivalence about the use of the term “feminist theology”, the word “feminist” was adopted in order to distinguish women’s theology from theological discourses that were not in dialogue with the feminist movements (Soares de Oliveira, 1995: 72-73).

Other events that contributed to the solidification of Latin American feminist liberation theology were the international dialogues promoted by the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). The interaction between Latin American theologians with African and Asian theologians, through EATWOT’s conferences, promoted both knowledge and cultural exchange. Through these valuable experiences, Latin American women liberation theologians realised the importance of developing critical cultural analysis. In 1983 the Women’s Commission of EATWOT was established as a response to African, Latin American and Asian women liberation theologians’ claim that “a theologizing from the perspective of women must be developed” (Mananza, 1996: 1). Due to their common colonized and oppressive religious

contexts, South American women theologians proposed a Latin American feminist liberation theology. They embraced their differences and allowed them to fuel their common resistance against theological, political, social and economic systems of domination. Together they developed a theology from women's perspective (Aquino, 2002: 15; Gebara, 1995a: 209). In the words of African feminist theologian Mercy Oduyoye this initiative is an "irruption within an irruption" (in Mananza, 1996: 1). This emerging global networking of women doing liberation theology resulted in innovative theological reflections (Grey, 1996:173-178).

As the depth of Latin American feminist liberation theologians' understandings of their double struggle increased, so did their demands for a liberationist framework that was invested in ending *women's* historical oppression. They argued that "the option for the poor" did not explicitly engage the reality and oppressions of poor women. Gradually, contentious theological issues arose between men and women as a result of this emerging feminist perspective. The classical response from their male counterparts was that women were implicitly included in the category of the poor. The "option for the poor" was also meant to be the option for poor women (Tamez, 1995; 79). Ivone Gebara's groundbreaking "Option for the Poor as an Option for Poor Women" (1987) clarified that women theologians' frame of reference was still the poor, however, she articulated an expanded understanding of the "poor" as a category. Gebara argued that although the poor "refers primarily to a social group deprived of material goods, [the poor] can be expanded to include an impoverished culture, voiceless minorities without rights, groups seeking elementary recognition in society. Women are included in this expansion of the term poor" (Gebara, 1987: 142-143). Elsa Tamez (1996) argued that culture analysis was not "viewed as important by most of the ideologists of the struggle" (1996: 12), as if they were afraid of having their economic and political focus shifted or distracted to something not as relevant.

Gebara has explained that Latin American feminist theology went through a series of phases that were shaped by various levels of feminist awareness (Gebara, 1995a: 208). Gebara's analysis of women liberation theologians' strategies during the 1970s highlights their ability to voice historical and biblical women's religious resistance and choosing the poor and the oppressed of society as their theological *locus*. The reality of poor women was finally foregrounded due to the effectiveness of their theological methods. Towards the end of the 1970s and during the 1980s, women theologians began to identify the patriarchal oppression(s) existing within their religious traditions, as well as within the liberationist hermeneutic methodology.

This, in return, led feminist theologians to revisit the idea of oppression as derived from the colonial legacy. By the early 1990s some of those feminist liberation theologians began integrating ecological concerns into their critical analysis towards the colonial legacy, capitalism and patriarchy, forming the backdrop of feminist liberationist critique. Feminist theologians redefined their views of what the liberationist framework ought to embrace. Leading these transitions was Ivone Gebara's influential work. The work in mediating a space that women, particularly poor women, could recognize their value as active subjects in society was now being established so as to include women's resistance to oppression and struggle against the accelerating global ecological crisis. The experience of lack of basic materials that were needed for daily survival, helped to clarify the ways economic interests manipulated the socio-cultural relationships between women and the natural world. The charges against the capitalist ideology from a feminist perspective were now empowered by the undeniable fact that poor women were the first to feel the impact of the ecological crisis. The theological task drafted now had women as the official agents of transformation.

Ivone Gebara was one of the first women liberation theologians to argue, on the basis of the liberationist hermeneutical circle, that women's historical oppression was interwoven with the capitalist system and theology. Moreover, Gebara (2001) clarified that locating women's subjugation as a point of departure within a liberationist framework is in tune with the needs of the immediate reality. In the same way, to embrace feminist and ecofeminist critiques represents an extension of the liberationist critique against the dominant ideology. Gebara (1992) has persistently explained that this view does not imply that men are not oppressed and victims of the same system, nor did it mean that gender oppression is the primary form of all domination within society. Rather, this means that the way towards egalitarianism is through acknowledging the various ways in which sexual, biological and gender differences have provided justifications for systems of oppression. This is a point that feminist theorists have long argued. Plumwood has explained that "while dualism makes difference the vehicle for hierarchy, it usually does so by distorting difference" (Plumwood, 1993: 59). For Gebara, the integration of a feminist and ecofeminist perspective into liberation theology represented an end to social inequality fostered by any form of male normativity. If liberation theologians choose to ignore historically constructed gender differences, their praxis-oriented method would paradoxically perpetuate dualistic and hierarchical forms of oppression. As such, feminist liberation theologians urged

male liberation theologians to recognise the “injustices brought by a patriarchal society and not just a capitalist one” (Tamez, 1996: 11).

From a queer liberation theological perspective, Althaus-Reid (2008) argued that the rise of feminist liberationist theology signified a struggle against sameness and normativity at the various levels of domination. This is illustrated by liberation theology’s paradoxical claim that “any liberative praxis starts always by our confrontation with Otherness. It is in the encounter with the Other that we encounter God and have opportunity to act morally. This liberative praxis is produced by our openness to an alternative order, characterized by a relation opposite to that expected in a capitalist system” (Dussel, in Althaus-Reid, 2009: 10). Gebara, amongst others, highlighted how this logic resulted in an “other” logic attempting “to assert itself”. This “‘other logic’ wants women to be entirely the creators of their own life and of societal life” (Gebara, 2002c: 161). Ironically, liberation theologians failed to accept that feminist theologians were trying to foreground how the idea of “others” became normalised by patriarchal values and practices of domination. For Gebara the notion of “others” “concerns the practical, the understanding of life and of contemporary things happening in neighbourhoods and in the organizations of the church...It is a matter of building egalitarian relationships” (*ibid.*).

### **3.4 The Impact of Patriarchal Theology on Gender Roles: A Brief Historical Overview**

The significant work of re-visiting colonial history undertaken by feminist liberation theologians had two main foci: 1) to examine the patriarchal ideologies brought to Latin America by the European Christian colonisers, that today pervade capitalism as well as theological discourses; 2) to work on the de-colonization of women’s identity and relativize patriarchal Christian concepts pertaining to gender roles.

Feminist liberation theologians, such as Carmen Lora through her “*Mujer Latinoamericana: Historia de una Rebeldía*” (Latin American Women: A History of Rebellion, 1988) contended that the formal development of theology did not pay sufficient attention to women’s religious experiences. She argued for a hermeneutic reconstruction on the basis that historical accounts portrayed indigenous women as weak-minded and easily subjugated. Lora resourcefully foregrounded empowering accounts of indigenous women’s historical struggle, and their resistance against the European colonizers.

Gebara investigated the impact of Catholicism in shaping the religious experiences of indigenous and black-African slaves during colonialism. She created a dialogue that brought to the centre the existing hybrid indigenous traditions (native and black-African). Gebara paved the way for emerging feminist liberationist hermeneutics. Elsa Tamez, inspired by Gebara, is perhaps the feminist theologian in Latin America who has worked the most in integrating indigenous cosmology into liberation theology. In *El Rostro Feminino de la Teología* (*The Feminine Face of Theology*, 1986),<sup>53</sup> Tamez breached the gap between Christianity and indigenous religious tradition. In “The Power of the Naked” (1989a: 1-14) she uses the Toltecans’ story of the birth of the god Quetzalcóatl as a resource for theological thinking.<sup>54</sup> The Toltecans’ story is employed by Tamez as a metaphor to encourage feminist liberation theologians to recreate cultural, ecclesial and theological history. In doing so, Tamez reverses the indigenous position as object of religious concern, to the position of subject of theological production. However, for Gebara, while the proposal of a hybrid theological discourse stimulated interreligious and intercultural learning processes, this theology also represents a form of resistance against an exclusivist theology. To search for social transformation by exposing and clarifying how Christianity, as it developed in Latin America’s popular religious traditions, is intrinsically linked with the once colonized religious traditions meant to develop a theological proposal for *agora*. Gebara’s Marian liberation theology is one such example of this strategy (Gebara and Bingemer, 1987). By paying attention to poor peoples’ religious experiences, Gebara interpreted Mary’s special position in Latin America, as an expression of the all-embracing pre-colonial Mother-Earth that has stayed alive in popular religion. But above all, as the one who appeases the suffering experienced by the poor in face of the immediate oppressive cultural and economic contexts. Gebara reclaimed Mary and redefined her role as a symbol of empowerment and liberation. Gebara fostered a liberationist dialogue where women’s experiences were seen as equally essential to the theological discourse as those of men. Hence, it was only with the emergence of feminist liberation theology that patriarchal theology was significantly engaged.

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<sup>53</sup> Translated into English as *Through Her Yes: Women’s Theology from Latin America* (1989a). However, the title literally means, “The Feminine Face of Theology”.

<sup>54</sup> According to Tamez, the Toltecs were pre-Aztec Mexican indigenous people and Quetzalcóatl was their high priest and god of life (1986).

### *The colonization of Women*

The colonial imaginary of indigenous people as barbarians, less than human, and naturally inferior to the white race, has been well documented.<sup>55</sup> Historians such as Burkholder and Johnsons have pointed out that the conquerors did not bring European women with them to the Americas (Burkholder and Johnsons, 2010: 43). However, what is rarely documented are the various ways in which indigenous women were defined by their purported sexual availability, promiscuity and wildness. For Aquino, these derogatory assumptions contributed to justify the subjugation of those considered by the colonizers “to be barbarians with limited mind and will” (Aquino, 2002: 14). As a consequence of this racist *and sexist* view, typical of Iberian society in the sixteenth century, indigenous and black-African women were subject to diverse levels of discrimination and oppression (Bidegain, 1989: 15-21).

Indigenous and black-African women were forced to fulfil the colonizer’s sexual needs and were frequently abused and raped. Violence and rape against women and children were horrifyingly commonplace throughout the colonial conquest. This was the beginning of the *mestizos*, the mixed-race offspring. The following indigenous account clarifies the suffering inflicted on native women:

This is the way the Mexicans died, the *tlatelolca*. They left their city deserted... and we had nothing to eat and we ate nothing. And all night long it rained on us...This was when people began to leave the town and when they left they went in rags and the women’s buttocks were almost naked. And from all sides Christians chased them. They pulled open their skirts, they handled them all over, their ears, their breasts, their hair...and they also took them by force, they chose those women with white skin, those with fair skin, those with fair bodies. And at the time of the attack some women covered their faces with mud and put on rags. (in Aquino, 2002: 14)

According to Gebara (2003c) because women and men were colonized differently, the liberationist analysis of colonial history must also take these important differences into account. Women were not only subjected to sexual exploitation in order to satisfy the colonizer’s needs. Indigenous and black-African married women were also separated from their husbands in order

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<sup>55</sup> See for example David A. Brading’s *The First America: The Spanish Monarchy, Creole Patriots, and the Liberal State, 1492-1867* (1991).

to guarantee the reproduction of the workforce as well as domestic labour. While men would be labouring, women would have childrearing as their primary responsibility in addition to the domestic labour on the farm (Gebara, 2003c: 170; Aquino, 2002: 46). The colonizers defined and divided male and female social roles based on their pre-conceived biological and economic interests (*ibid.*). According to Aquino, this situation negatively impacted the ways in which “women understood their role in the indigenous family and society” (2002: 14). Even though pre-Columbian cultures had a form of patriarchal structure, women were part of all the spheres of life, “including military affairs, government, decisions about their own body, and the administration of property” (2002: 14). The work-related and sexual colonization of women, coupled with the patriarchal social structure and theology, forged a complex context where women’s household role became gradually undervalued by explicitly viewing it as women’s natural space, which was explained as predetermined by divine command. Consequently, the elimination of women’s participation in public space became an increasingly naturalized social behaviour.

Bidegain (1989: 15-16) problematized the colonization of women’s bodies by engaging the conquerors’ preconception of indigenous women as sexually untamed. Bidegain argued that indigenous women’s bodies were understood to be part of the same realm as the natural environment, where both (women and nature) were objects to be tamed, dominated and exploited. This interrelatedness of women’s sexuality and nature is clearly illustrated in Michel de Certeau’s (1985) description of Europe’s encounter with the New World:

Explorer Amerigo Vespucci arrives from the sea. Erect, cuirassed like a crusader, he bears the arms of his European experiences and beliefs. In the background are the ships that will bear to the West the treasures of a paradise. Before him is the Amerindian—nude, recumbent—nameless presence of difference, body stirring awake in a riot of exotic plants and animals.

After a moment of stupefaction in this antechamber of paradise, beside this colonnade of trees, suddenly the conquistador will write upon the body of this other, this female person before him. In her flesh he will carve his own history. He will make of her the storied body of his labors and fantasies. She will be called: Latin America.

This erotic, warlike image has an all but mythic value. It represents the inauguration of a new, Western purpose for writing. What is about to be

scratched on this flesh is the colonization of a body by the discourse of power—the scripture of the conquistador. That conqueror will tear out this blank page, this untamed New World, and make use of it to mark down his Western desires and longings. (in Bidegain, 1989: 15-16)

The feminist work on reclaiming and redefining women's identity in postcolonial contexts has surfaced as a struggle to prove their own humanity. In situating women on the same level as the natural environment, the colonizers have not only objectified and conquered women's body, they have also positioned women as belonging to a different species than men.

### ***Patriarchal Theology***

Feminist liberation theologians have investigated and problematized the ways in which the dualistic and oppressive understanding about the sexuality brought to Latin America by the European Catholic colonizer contributed to the quick expansion of capitalist exploitation in the continent. Bidegain (1984: 54) has argued that the capitalist system was designed to exploit the human to its maximum in order to get to ever higher levels of economic development. Concurrently, Catholic sexual morality established that sex was for reproduction and women were to focus on the affairs of the home as well as on their motherhood call. For Bidegain, patriarchal theological teachings on gender roles spread throughout the continent with the establishment of the pastoral activities of the Church, which contributed to tune family relations with the elements of social production (Bidegain de Urán, 1984: 54).

According to Bidegain, overtime Catholic sexual morality stepped out from the periphery onto centre stage and sin became more closely related to sexuality. In shifting believers' focus to overcoming their own individual sin of sexuality, the emphasis given to sexuality as an evil energy generated "the relegation of politico-social concerns to a secondary status" (Bidegain de Urán, 1984: 55). As such, it was no longer necessary to struggle against social injustice or to criticize the social structure in moral terms, because that structure at best was seen as a lesser evil (1984: 54-56). This emerging perspective led to the development of the Latin *machista* ideology. *Machismo* was not very different from European patriarchy, but rather accentuated it. *Machismo* was manifested in the underlying cultural understanding of construction and reproduction of "intrafamilial relationships rather than [...] socio-political action" (Bidegain de Urán, 1984: 55). Women were perceived to be the ones who would naturally maintain this intergenerational



reproduction, whereas men were expected to dedicate only part of their time to the household due to their main role in social production. Women's marginalization from public life thus generated a twofold form of oppression. The emphasis on women's natural vocation to virginity or motherhood positioned virgins under the tutelage of guardianship. On the other hand, once married and mothers, a form of contradictory sublimation of this prime domestic role would regard the outside world's activities as beneath the wives' and mothers' dignity (Bidegain de Urán, 1984: 55-56). Christian symbols, such as the Virgin Mary, were once more manipulated by the dominant patriarchal religious ethos and used to teach women's natural role of motherhood and submissiveness to the male authorities: fathers, brothers, priests, husbands, politicians and so on.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, through the struggle for independence, development and improved well-being were the expected results of liberation and democracy. Independence, however, resulted in a different form of colonial oppression: the domination by Spain and Portugal was replaced by the neo-colonial powers.

The dynamics of an imbalanced sexual division of labour prevailed through independence and industrialization. However, with the new socio-economic reality, new contours of patriarchal oppression associated with the industrialization process emerged. Upper and middle class women were exploited in the private domain as unpaid reproducers of the workforce. Poor women had to bear the double burden of working as waged labourers in the public sphere and still bear the responsibilities related to the household. Yet, the position of the primary decision-maker remained fathers, husbands, and sons. The unequal distribution of work in the family allowed men to continue controlling the public space, which resulted in the production of political, economic and intellectual projects from male-centred perspectives. Existing social relationships clearly reflected the consequences of this disproportional share of power in which males' control over women's sexuality, reproduction and work was responsible for perpetuating women's subordinate position within society as well as in propagating patriarchal traditions (Gebara 2003c: 170; Ress, 2006: 131).

Gendered public and domestic domains worsened the oppression of women whose families needed their waged work for a living. Due to men's perceptions about women's natural inclination toward motherhood for example, prejudice towards women's work performance increased throughout the public sector. As a result, women had to work twice as hard to prove

their value. In addition, waged women labourers worked in disadvantaged conditions. They had longer work hours and lower wages than men, while their domestic work remained undervalued.<sup>56</sup> Aquino argued against such unequal social practices by stating that liberation theology could not be oblivious to the inferiority attributed to female nature, which was evidently justified and reinforced by the “ideologico-cultural expression [and/in] sexist politico-social structures” (Aquino, 2002: 25).

Another point raised by feminist liberation theologians was that the patriarchal teachings of the Catholic Church, emanating from the Roman metropolis, strongly dictated the religious contexts in Latin America. In South America the influence of Catholic religious ideology on sexual morality increased after 1891 when the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* reinforced the notion of women’s role in society as exclusively wives and mothers (Hamington, 1995: 41).

In the early part of the nineteenth century new liberatory roles for women were tentatively articulated by the first wave of feminism. While women gained civil rights to vote, to education and relatively acceptable work hours, still neither the discrimination against women’s performance nor the unequal sexual division of labour were overcome. According to Barbara Pope, it also did not make a big impact on the Vatican, with Pope Pius XI’s declaration that it was intolerable that mothers were trying to find jobs outside the home (Pope, B., 1985: 181). Over the last decades, Catholic sexual morality became the target of critical analysis undertaken by feminists and feminist theologians across the globe. In using the words of pioneering feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “the essentialism that generalizes a biological difference into a gendered ontological dualism has been a long-standing means of excluding women from theological, political, and intellectual endeavours (witness the dearth of recognized women theologians and philosophers prior to the modern era)” (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1975: 623).

In 1990 several liberation theologians worked together to produce *Mysterium Liberationis: Conceptos Fundamentales de la Teología de Liberación* (1990). This collection brought together the major thinkers of liberation theology. However, only four were women and their themes were specifically the ones perceived as feminine, for example, “Women and the

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<sup>56</sup> The relationship between capitalism and domestic work has been extensively discussed by feminists. Scholars have argued that the very existence of unpaid work, the housework, “legitimizes the classification of women as a second-class work force” (Aquino 2002: 22). Since women’s primary work has been defined by “nature” as domestic, women within the labour market are seen as a reserve work force. Capitalism takes advantage of the sexual division of labour, as it justifies women’s lower wages and their low-status work.

Theology of Liberation” and “Mary”.<sup>57</sup> Notably, although Protestant theologians were part of the liberationist movement from its beginning, they were absent from *Mysterium Liberationis*. Furthermore, there was an absence of voices from indigenous people and African-Latinos as well as any discussion on ecology. Leonardo Boff had already published several scholarly contributions to these themes. The lack of space given to diverse liberationist voices in *Mysterium Liberationis* renders visible that the pioneers of liberation theology were still operating under a binary hierarchical framework, despite its progressive stance on many issues cultural normativity was still to be unearthed from liberation theological discourse. According to Gebara, among others, because patriarchy is based on normativity, sexism is only one of its by-products.

In 1985, the first *Latin American Encounter on Theology from a Women’s Perspective*, held in Buenos Aires, brought together an ecumenical representation from nine nations in Latin America and the Caribbean. This confirmed the establishment of Latin American feminist liberation theology (Soares de Oliveira, 1995: 67). One of the most significant outcomes of this transnational network was the construction of an alternative liberationist framework, which is sufficiently inclusive of women’s different experiences of reality. In addition to extending the category of the poor, feminist theologians were starting to redefine theological analysis on the basis of difference.

During the 1990s, Gebara urged liberation and feminist liberation theologians to work on a new discourse and epistemology that viewed women’s bodies and sexuality as important experiential sources. Gebara also searched for new forms of spirituality that had the potential of uniting the nature-culture dichotomy by reflecting the materiality of real human life rather than an ideological and transcendent male God in the heavens. Subsequently, Gebara argued for a new religious ethic to inspire forms of resistance against dualistic frameworks. She also hoped to engender inclusivity and collegiality by changing the process of transmitting knowledge. She stated that we need to work “toward changing the hierarchical power structure itself, which continues to propagate itself in the underlying structures of our society and, in consequence, of our knowing” (1999: 21). Gebara, who had during the 1980s proposed a new religious anthropology that regarded woman and man as equally capable of theological construction, now

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<sup>57</sup> Ivone Gebara was one of the female authors that contributed to *Mysterium Liberationis*. See “Mary” (1993: 482-495).

continued her own theological process. She proposed a holistic anthropology, which included the natural environment. In this proposal Gebara carved a new path in order to create egalitarian and sustainable community through a liberationist framework. The following statement summarizes Gebara's liberationist framework from her emerging ecofeminist perspective:

[F]eminist theology is trying to recover the essential core of the Christian experience, beginning with a different understanding of the relationships between men and women and of humanity's relationship with the whole of creation, by taking seriously people's concrete experience. Similarly, certain feminist theories, which I too endorse, want to relocate religious experience in a meaning under construction day by day, in continuity with our ancestors and along the many paths of tenderness and mercy. (Gebara, 2002c: 161)

### **Conclusion: Furthering an Ecofeminist Theological Political Praxis**

In this chapter, I have examined Gebara's theological trajectory in light of the historical developments of liberation theology and feminist liberation theology. I have deliberately chosen this approach so as to show the various ways in which Gebara's feminist theology is reflective of a particular ongoing and shifting historical processes in the postcolonial and religious context of Latin America. I have entitled Gebara's theological trajectory "A History of Resistance". Gebara's theological development is an embodiment of a history of resistance, reflecting her own reality and subjectivity and serves as a demonstration of alternative constructions of knowledge and meaning-making.

In this chapter I have drawn on insights from Gebara's 'history of resistance', which may advance a shared North-South ecofeminist political praxis. In exploring the nature of Gebara's praxis-oriented methodology, I found her 'on-the-move' theology particularly interesting as it foregrounds the notion of immediacy. The immediate reality of oppression as experienced by the poor, especially women, impacted Gebara's own experiences to such an extent that, I argue, it existentially challenged her own religious subjectivity and formulation of the theological task. Gebara's immediate reality inspired her theological proposal and commitment to the liberation of the marginalised in society. In the centre of Gebara's theological methodology is an axis featuring two overlapping characteristics which synthesize her theological work and political goals. Namely, her commitment to empower marginalised women and to construct theology in

light of their immediate reality. I suggest that these two characteristics have taken place as a result of witnessing, experiencing and analysing people's religious responses to the immediate social, economic and political challenges of Latin America.

### ***The Concept of Immediate as a Compass***

In "Itinerario Teológico: Una Breve Introducción," (Theological Itinerary: A Brief Introduction),<sup>58</sup> Gebara (2001) explained that her theological trajectory sought to empower marginalised women to consciously and actively participate in the construction of society (2001: 236). In doing so, she also developed strategic ways to concretize this aim. For Gebara, it is through investigating the function or manner in which religious phenomena are manifested in people's lives that useful theological responses are revealed. As such, it is the immediate reality of oppression as experienced by poor women that functions as a compass for feminist liberationist constructions. Gebara identified that religion commonly play the role of comforter and protector in the immediate reality of the poor. A critical analysis of the root-causes of this 'comforting' religious role reveals the vulnerable and uncertain reality of daily survival. Hence, the theological task is to assist people in their search for liberation and open up new avenues for religious meaning-making in oppressive context, including the notion that God has not predetermined the poor's oppressive reality. Rather, reality is socially constructed. For Gebara (2001: 237) the constructed nature of reality means that reality can be deconstructed and reconstructed. Gebara identifies human desire and hope as powerful tools for resistance and agency.

Gebara's praxis-oriented methodology highlights the idea of the 'local' as both personal and contextual. If the immediate reality of oppression is the compass of feminist theology, then a theologian's task is to construct a theology that contests the underlying ideologies of oppression and liberates and empowers the marginalised.

Recognizing how reference points always are limited and relative, Gebara destabilized religious norms by rendering visible the subjective and partial reality in which biblical authors and interpreters of the Christian tradition were situated. The multi-layered subjectivities that partook in the construction of the Christian tradition empowered Gebara's own construction of theology and she noted how her theological perspectives were inspired and transformed through

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<sup>58</sup> The following quotes from this article are my own translation from the original in Spanish.

experiencing the reality of others. Constructing theology based on the immediate and local (personal and contextual) is to also take into consideration the significant influence of global dimensions determining the dialectical processes between local cultural, political and economic relations.

In a previous chapter I discussed Heather Eaton's (2001) desire to promote a global ecofeminist theology that holds a liberationist critique at its centre. I argue in this thesis that Eaton's proposal intersects with the work that has been developed by Latin American feminist liberation theologians. On one level, Eaton (2001: 77) has urged international ecofeminist theologians to work together to narrow the gap between practice and theory and proposed that ecofeminist engagement with liberationist theological perspectives might engender such an approach. Eaton draws on Gebara to warn ecofeminist theologians that while liberation theology has advanced a revolutionary critical methodology, it is not grounded in feminist or ecological theories. It seems plausible, though she did not explicitly state it, that Eaton was opening the door to rebuild the liberationist perspective with ecofeminist roots. Throughout this chapter, I explored the critique advocated by feminist liberation theologians pertaining to male liberation theologians' lack of engagement with gender difference and inequality. While Eaton envisioned that the transformation of ecofeminist religious discourse could happen by foregrounding political praxis, in Latin America, feminist theologians worked to transform the liberationist framework by incorporating feminist theory, and later ecological perspectives. In this light, the critical importance of a continuous dialogical dynamic between Northern and Southern ecofeminist theologians cannot be overstated. This necessary dialogue will possibly strengthen the global ecofeminist aim of exposing the link between material connections and the women-nature association.

On another level, it is in light of the feminist liberation development process that I see in the ecofeminist religious discourse a powerful path to promote social justice and liberation, locally and globally. There are three characteristics emerging from ecofeminist theology that underscore their transformational and political edge, and which potentially could be used as the ground on which to build a shared political praxis.

First, ecofeminist theologians are already committed to work towards social change by re-reading religious scriptures from a feminist and ecological perspective so as to frame the need for social change in religious terms. Second, the transformational capacity of ecofeminism, a

characterising feature from its inception, is an advantage in the development of a shared political aim for a global ecofeminist theology. In other words, being in constant development, always evolving and adapting, ecofeminist theology resists falling into the same pattern towards orthodoxy and stagnation, a charge brought against male theologians by Latin American feminist theologians. Third, from the common political interest in emancipating women and the natural environment, global ecofeminist theologians have the potential to set in motion a new wave of activist and political movements against ecological destruction and women's oppression. I argue that the fact that global ecofeminist theologians, positioned in both the North and the South, are working for the emancipation of women and nature is a first step in creating a jointly visioned world for us all to live in. Conversely, by paying particular attention to Gebara's notion of immediacy or the immediate reality, ecofeminist theology fosters critical investigations of the root-causes of oppression in diverse social contexts. This strategy, while setting in motion local liberationist processes, would concurrently maintain the political awareness so necessary in the global ecofeminist religious discourse. The importance of local and global dialogical dynamics is reflective of a global ecofeminist political praxis that is on-the-move.

Gebara (2001: 237-238) has also used the immediate as a compass to prepare her workshops with women's groups throughout Latin America. She explained that her starting point is to clarify that the oppression towards the poor, and particularly women, is socially constructed, Gebara explains that when severing the belief in a "woman's destiny" it is possible to fight for women's full citizenship and humanity (Gebara, 2001: 237). First, foregrounding the notion of the immediate, Gebara aims to liberate women from their patriarchal blindfolds and to empower them to becoming aware of their active participation in the construction of society. In facilitating discussions that helped women recognise their value as women, Gebara inspired women to take ownership of their own lives. Second, she encouraged women to share their stories by contextualizing them. The contextualization of one's own history reveals the roots of one's questions and answers. Third, in exposing the subjective realities that emerged from the immediate context of oppression, Gebara motivated women to find different answers than those previously held by these women. Realising the ideas, ideologies and assumptions that informs the immediate reality of life as well as the historical processes and political changes that has given rise to the immediate 'now', might inspire a political praxis (Gebara, 2001: 237).

Gebara explained that she has persisted in her work, much due to what she called, the awakening of women's historical consciousness in Latin America (1989c: 43). Gebara argued that not only women scholars were inspired by this awakening—by increasingly incorporating gender analysis into their work—but 'women's historical consciousness' was also evident among women at the grassroots level who started to question their established motherly/domestic roles (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 12). In *Levanta-Te e Anda* (1989a) Gebara narrated how women within the CBCs, in different women's groups and pastoral community projects, started to articulate their gendered realities. These compelling and inspiring narratives illuminate the liberationist process developing from marginalised poor women in the North of Brazil as they started to understand their own personhood outside of patriarchal definitions (1989a: 14). Gebara illustrates this shift in consciousness by employing the examples of the housewives Noemia and Tereza:

My mother had nineteen children, and I already have five. It is one pregnancy after the other. This goes on until women can no longer cope or until the man loses interest...Will it be the same when my daughters grow up? Only now that I am part of this women's group am I starting to understand that the world must change for my own sake and for my daughters' sake. (Noemia in Gebara, 1989a: 14)<sup>59</sup>

My name is Tereza. I have three children. I am part of this learning group. Neither my grandmother, nor my mother learned how to read. I started to learn how to read here, during this year. Yesterday my father-in-law came to my house to reprimand me for being part of this group. He said, "How inappropriate it is for an old woman who is already a mother to begin studying." I replied, "Mr Antonio, the times have changed. Nowadays women have rights. The time of living only for the stove has ended." (Tereza, 22 years old, in Gebara, 1989a: 14)<sup>60</sup>

I would suggest that as a nun and scholar, Gebara's praxis-oriented methodology facilitated understandings of particular realities that would otherwise remain concealed. Gebara, a liberationist who lives by her own choice in solidarity among the poor, will never experience the same level of cultural oppression that poor mothers, married or single, experience. It is only via

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<sup>59</sup> My own translation from Portuguese.

<sup>60</sup> My own translation from Portuguese.



dialoguing, listening, learning and incorporating the realities of others that her liberationist theology can be on-the-move. Her humility in learning from others and making them her teachers encourages her search for ever-expanding and inclusive paths to freedom. To be a free-thinker and to contribute to the liberation of others appear to be motivated by her genuine desire to end all forms of oppression. Global ecofeminist theology needs this insight. To be committed to social struggle is essential, but connecting this commitment to the reality of suffering and one's own suffering might inspire a level of commitment that is essential to an ecofeminist political praxis. This sort of connection can only be made through a praxis-oriented methodology.

## CHAPTER 4

### A NEW ANTHROPOLOGY

#### Introduction

This chapter introduces Ivone Gebara's feminist theology and her alternative Christian anthropology. The development of Gebara's feminist liberation theology illustrates how liberation theologians played a crucial role in her thinking, particularly related to their pioneering efforts in developing a critical theology of hope in Latin America. Liberation theologians charged traditional Christian theology with not being responsive to the continent's social challenge of poverty. In addressing this contextual challenge, liberation theologians initiated alternative readings of the sacred scriptures using the poor as their lens and theological *locus*. These socially responsive readings brought dignity and hope to the poor and disempowered.

In recent years the liberationist voice became more diverse and increasingly included feminist theologies and indigenous/African-Latino-centred discourses. As highlighted by scholars such as Rosemary R. Ruether (1998; 2008c), Heather Eaton (2001; 2005), Marcella Althaus-Reid (2006) and Joerg Rieger (2004), Latin American feminist liberation theologians also incorporated feminist methodology and ecological concerns as part of their liberationist voice. The reality created by ecological degradation and experienced by poor and marginalised people, made Latin American feminist liberation theologians to highlight and problematize the existing interrelationship between women's oppression and the destruction of earth systems. Furthermore, feminist liberation theologians identified Christian cosmology as the primary perpetrator of these interconnected oppressions and therefore called for a complete overhaul of traditional Christian views of the universe. Leading this charge in the South American context was the Brazilian ecofeminist theologian, Ivone Gebara.

The evolution of Gebara's theological thinking illustrates an all-embracing process of feminist liberationist awareness. Her increased attention to feminist perspectives engendered inter-faith and multicultural dialogue between feminists situated in the Global South and Global North. Latin American feminist liberation theologians integrated Northern feminist theology and gender critique into their investigations on women's diverse experiences of oppression, so as to keep with the liberationist aim of bringing liberation to the oppressed. Inspired by the cultural-

symbolic analysis developed in the Global North, Latin American feminists began investigating their own reality on a cultural and symbolic level during the 1980s. In return, Latin American feminist liberation theology, which broadly speaking is a combination of cultural-symbolic and socio-economic analysis through liberation theological lenses, critically contributed to Northern ecofeminist theological discourse through their particular attention to women's diverse and multi-layered experiences. For example, as discussed in chapter two, since the 1990s Northern ecofeminist theologians foregrounded the need to include the religious experiences and the many issues brought by global ecofeminists. As explained by Eaton (2005) Euro-Western ecofeminists subjected themselves to the transformative questions brought by diversity of culture, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and religious commitment. From the perspective of postcolonial theory, this transformative process revealed how Northern feminist theological thinking re-emerged through the experiences of Southern theologians as a new synthesis. This new synthesis inspired many Northern theologians to adjust some of their views according to the experiences of others, particularly those in the Global South. The evolving process of increased attentiveness to locality and diversity led to strengthen the global ecofeminist religious discourse.

Throughout this chapter my main aim is to show how the production of feminist liberation theology in a male-inscribed hierarchical context necessitated a new Christian anthropology that could be flexible enough to encompass the diverse and changing realities of the people.

Internationally, Ivone Gebara's work was first recognized through her book *Maria, Mãe de Deus e Mãe dos Pobres: Um Ensaio Apartir da Mulher e da América Latina* (insert year originally published), co-written with Brazilian liberation theologian Maria Clara Bingemer and translated into English in 1989 to *Mary Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*. This work was primarily an effort to involve liberation theologians in a project inclusive of women's experiences and perspectives, which could foster a more integrated and gender-sensitive religious ethic. Through this chapter it becomes evident that Gebara's Marian liberationist theology is just one example of her on-the-move theological methodology. Other works that illustrate her strategic anthropological approach, all of which have never been translated into English, are: *"Levanta-Te e Anda": Alguns Aspectos da Caminhada da Mulher na América Latina* ("Stand Up and Walk": *The Characteristics of the Journey of the Latin American Woman*, 1989a); *As Incômodas Filhas de Eva na Igreja da América Latina* (*The Stubborn*

*Daughters of Eve in the Latin American Church*, 1989b); *Conhece-Te a Ti Mesma (Knowing Yourself)*,<sup>61</sup> 1991a); and *Poder e Não-Poder das Mulheres (The Power and the Non-Power of Women)*, 1991b). In these works, Gebara made the case for an inclusive, unifying, realistic and multi-dimensional anthropology that she initially described as “human-centred”. When analysing Gebara’s Marian liberation theology from a postcolonial perspective it becomes apparent that her alternative anthropology was ahead of her time. During the 1980s, Gebara was not yet using the word ecofeminism. However, in *As Incômodas Filhas de Eva* (1989b) she began to subtly introduce the notion that all beings are related through a web of networks. This was in order to render visible the subjective reality of all theological constructions, which is illustrated by her argument that an anthropological position that takes into account ways in which humans, nature and the cosmos are interrelated is better equipped to grasp the nuances of dualistic patriarchal ideologies that foster racism, sexism, classism and imperialism (1989b: 15).

My analysis of Gebara’s ecofeminist liberationist perspective reveals a logical progression from this alternative feminist anthropology. During the 1980s, Gebara has discussed the human ability and need to construct untenable religious symbols that are actually projections of subjective contexts. As such, the androcentric views that had defined Mary through moral theology and dogmas could be transformed in order to liberate and answer the needs of poor women living in contemporary contexts. It appears that reclaiming the historical Mary as the Mother of the poor revealed an unacknowledged popular contestation of the male God. This kind of symbolic subversion of patriarchal constructed notions of the divine is a central feature underlining Gebara’s ecofeminist work from the 1990s.

The development of Latin American feminist liberation theology spans around thirty years and can be divided into three stages, loosely coinciding with the decades of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. In this chapter, I engage the development of Gebara’s feminist theology by paying particular attention to the 1980s and reveal how her feminist theology correlated with increasing levels of feminist consciousness, and over time, forged new ecofeminist perspectives. Through this analysis, I will draw special attention to the development of Gebara’s feminist theological anthropology, as well as to the limitations of her Marian theology.

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<sup>61</sup> The personal pronoun used in Portuguese for “yourself” is in its female form.

#### **4.1 The Intersecting Realities Underlying Gebara's Feminist Liberation Theology**

From 1985 to 1990, Gebara, among others, began developing a feminist theology from the experiences of women situated in the Global South, more specifically, in Latin America. The development of feminist theology through this initial phase was marked by women's attempt to conceptualise an alternative feminist hermeneutic and anthropology by expanding the liberationist view of the poor as a category. It is essential to consider the particular contextual circumstances of Latin American feminist theology of the 1980s in order to understand their first feminist attempts and subsequent development during the 1990s. This section, however, does not offer an extensive analysis of their hermeneutical methods. It is rather focused on highlighting feminist theologians' progression in unravelling patriarchal thinking from their own feminist theological developments. With this in mind, I introduce the ways in which the simultaneous emerging of the indigenous and Afro-Latin centred discourses impacted feminist theologians' perspective and stress Gebara's theological thinking in particular.

##### ***The Feminization of Theology***

Latin American feminist liberation theologians emerged as a force comprised of Christian women activists from denominations within the Latin American context, academics and leaders of grassroots organizations from various countries in the South. As previously discussed in chapter three, feminist liberation theologians' praxis-oriented methodology during the 1980s was a progression from the 1970s as it increasingly rendered visible poor women's subjectivities and experiences of oppression. More and more, women liberation theologians demanded to be acknowledged as equally capable of theological production. However, although changes were taking place, theological discourses still lacked significant engagement with emerging global as well as local gender theories. According to Gebara (2013),<sup>62</sup> around 1985 a group of women liberation theologians, including herself, entered into dialogue with feminist movements from Latin America. However, due to the existing theological polarization, there was still no dialogue between Latin American women liberation theologians and feminist theologians from First World countries.

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<sup>62</sup> Interview given to Mônica Teixeira on the University of São Paulo Virtual Channel - UNIVESP TV Channel (10 July, 2013). Gebara discusses the Church's pedagogy in this recent interview for the TV show *Complicações* in Brazil, see <http://m.youtube.com/watch?v=Bfm-p-tonnU>.

The progression of feminist liberation theology during the 1980s entailed a gradual process of restructuring and refining a feminist liberationist hermeneutic. Due to the extensive involvement of women theologians with the liberationist cause it was crucial to pay attention to the many contexts and relationships at play, e.g. male-female relationships, male-female theologian relationships, First-Third World relationships and cross-cultural relationships, among many more. However, further complicating the development of Latin American feminist theological ideas was the perception by male liberation theologians that feminism in Latin America was influenced by First World perspectives and, consequently, white-ness. As such, feminist theologies were seen as a distraction from the real socio-economic issues (Althaus, Reid, 2009). Althaus-Reid (2009: 13) explained that Latin American women sought to create theology in community that was not against men and not outside the liberationist parameters. On this basis, women theologians partook in the process of liberation theological construction by participating in the liberation of their own communities. In order to mediate the broader cultural issues linked to male theologians concerns about feminism, feminist theologians aimed to render visible the experiences of poor women participating in CBCs.

Elsa Tamez (1995: 83) has explained that the progression of the conceptualisation of women's own particular liberationist stances led some to adopt the term 'feminist theology'. However, the term feminist was not yet accepted in all theological circles, and most theologians would rather say 'theology from women's perspective'. The ambivalence towards the term feminist was due to the stigma expressed by male theologians, toward feminist movements in the First World. It was towards the end of the 1980s, with the increasing differences in theological viewpoints that the term feminist was adopted in order to distinguish women's theology from theological discourses that were not in dialogue with the feminist movements. The end of the 1980s, particularly due to Gebara's efforts, signalled the start of a dialogue between feminist theologians of the Global North and South.

As a form of resistance against theological, political, social and economic systems of domination and in solidarity with their common colonized and oppressive religious contexts, Latin American feminist liberation theologians starting point was to construct together a liberationist perspective premised on women's experiences. Consuelo del Prado's "I Sense God in Another Way" (1989 [1986]) explains that women's fight for a life of dignity and solidarity with the poor is more coherent when articulated from their own experiences and point of view

(1989 [1986]: 140-149). Del Prado claimed that the normative theological discourse primarily reflected men's reality. Hence, by integrating women's experiences into theological analysis the development of a feminist hermeneutics emerged in a way that referenced women's subjectivities, language, feelings, desires, pleasures and sorrows.

The central strategy adopted by feminist liberation theologians was the feminization of theology, particularly through working with female symbols of God. They sought to contest the patriarchal undervaluing of women's roles by affirming virtues such as motherliness, unselfishness and tenderness as essentially godly and feminine. The "maternal face of God" became one of the central images advocated through feminist hermeneutics. According to Tamez, the traditional theological God-language was challenged and accused of being "too analytical, rigid, excessively rational and word centred" (Tamez, 1995: 82). In some Christian circles, God started to be referred to as both mother and father. The Holy Spirit also took on a feminine character (see Verhoeven, 1989 [1986]). The reading of the passion and resurrection of Jesus was reconstructed in light of women's daily struggles and desire for liberation (see Ritchie, 1989 [1986]). Ress explains that in relativizing gendered feminine characteristics, feminist theologians hoped to foster political practices of justice, accompanied by loving praxis, such as solidarity and tenderness towards those who suffer unjustly (2006: 11). The feminization of theology was intended to humanize the political sphere and thereby make it responsive to issues of health, justice and equality.

Examining Gebara's theological work during the 1980s, it seems apparent that she endeavoured through a path slightly different from that mentioned above. Gebara contributed to the advancement of an alternative feminist approach to the sacred scriptures by producing theology that sought to operate beyond patriarchal essentialism. Through her groundbreaking "Option for the Poor as an Option for Poor Women" (1987), Gebara presented an expanded understanding of the "poor" as a category. She explained that the question of 'who is the poor in society' needed to be reconceptualised in order to include "an impoverished culture, voiceless minorities without rights, [and] groups seeking elementary recognition in society". (Gebara, 1987: 142-143). In problematizing liberation theology's methodology, Gebara articulated for the first time that the poor was only seen through a Marxist class analytical lens, as productive subjects, instead of taking into account that 'the poor' also included gendered and reproductive subjects. Her concerns were centred on forging a new paradigm of enquiry to the liberationist

framework, which was informed by women's realities. Gebara foregrounded an alternative Christian anthropology that analysed the dynamics between representations of the divine and its influence on women's lives at the margins. Gebara's anthropology facilitated a space from which feminist theologians could develop new insights by applying a feminist hermeneutical analysis. Her leading role is revealed in light of her progressive thinking throughout the 1980s, which inspired the construction of a Marian liberation theology aimed at reconstructing religious ethics.

However, some feminists, such as queer theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid (2000), criticized Gebara and Bingemer's book for its naive liberationist re-reading of Mary. I contend that this criticism is a clear misunderstanding of the central aim of the book, which as previously mentioned was to foster a more integrated religious ethic through an alternative anthropological proposal. Hence, Althaus-Reid's critique, I argue, did not adequately consider the particular contextual circumstances of Latin American feminist theology of the 1980s, which inspired this Marian liberation theology. In *Liberation Theology and Sexuality* (2006) Althaus-Reid seems to revise some of her earlier criticism about Gebara's work. In particular she stresses that feminist liberation theologians' work appeared to have moved away from the liberationist framework of the 1970s and 1980s in order to incorporate notions on difference. Moreover, in this same anthology, Althaus-Reid brings the voice of Brazilian Anglican queer theologian Mario Ribas (2009 [2006]): 123-135) who carries Gebara's anthropological proposal even further by proposing a queer Marian liberationist perspective.<sup>63</sup>

As discussed in chapter two, from 1982, Gebara began arguing against the multi-layered forms of oppression faced by poor women based on the emerging 'culture of the immediate' that visibly affected the dynamics of the CBCs. It was under this framework that she and Bingemer proposed the Marian liberation theology as it better represented the struggle and liberationist process of the people in the CBCs. Gebara and Bingemer argued that the ways that people were "mindful of Mary in their ongoing life struggle" revealed a theological reflection that emerged from their daily experiences and concrete practices (1989: 162). They stressed that people reclaimed Mary as a symbol of hope and that her presence nourished the poor (1989: 162). In Latin America "she [Mary] is increasingly the figure of the church of the poor, of which the base communities are a new and outstanding embodiment" (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 163).

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<sup>63</sup> In *Nationalism and the Imagination*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2010) has written about reproductive heteronormativity and the multiple forms that women play a role in reinforcing it.



Gebara and Bingemer explained that it was necessary to forge an alternative religious anthropology in order to make it possible for Mary, as a historical woman of the poor, to become the symbol of liberation and the expression of the church of the poor in Latin America. The construction of Mary was in opposition to the oppressive and dogmatic teachings of submission and motherhood that continued to be imposed on women. Moreover, Marian feminist liberation theology was presented as a “community theology” and “not an individualistic...‘white women’ theology” (Althaus-Reid, 2009: 13).

These feminist theological efforts of the 1980s were generally welcomed by male theologians who believed that their female colleagues’ central involvement would lead to the equality and recognition that they were fighting for. However, through the liberationist process, women’s theological and pastoral work in the CBCs began unravelling the detached male liberationist perspectives, which were completely removed from the reality of poor women. As an attempt to cover this gap, Gebara began articulating the act of knowing as “influenced by sex, place, time, and date, and is also marked by ideological assumptions and sexist leanings” (Gebara, 1999b: 27). This observation allowed Gebara to work on the construction of an alternative Christian anthropology focused on women’s understandings of reality, a perspective which is inescapably embodied and contextually embedded, yet global.<sup>64</sup> At the same time, Gebara argued that, although liberation theologians have re-read the sacred scriptures in light of the egalitarian notions of the ‘Reign of God’, the patriarchal nexus is still central in this hermeneutical proposal (1989a: 24-25). To live according to the values of the ‘Reign of God’, which evolve around the defence of life, meant to defend and promote life according to the pre-established patriarchal norms and worldview. Gebara attempted to deconstruct these patriarchal theological ‘truths’ by stressing the liberationist goals of meeting the needs of the people in contemporary contexts. Hence she legitimately argued about the need to incorporate the reality of poor women’s religious experiences lived in the CBCs into the liberationist analysis.

For Gebara, it was only logical to begin her feminist trajectory by articulating an anthropology that could “do justice to the complexity of human reality” (Gebara and Bingemer,

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<sup>64</sup> At this point, it is interesting to note this transition in Gebara’s ways of thinking, initially as a feminist liberation theologian, Gebara argued that the ending of economic poverty is interconnected with restoring gender and social relations. During the 1990s, as an ecofeminist theologian, she argued that the incorporation of ecological concerns and the reality of all living beings into her cultural-socio-economic analysis was a logical extension as she was invested in analysing oppression from a multi-layered lens. Gebara has then defined reality as “our understanding of the phenomena that touch us—of our life experiences and our ways of knowing them” (1999b: 22).

1989: 2). At this point, it is useful to make clear that Gebara's anthropological discussion is of a theological nature. She formulated a theological re-interpretation of the human person and what the human task should be. Her feminist liberationist re-reading of Mary served the purpose to challenge the foundations of the patriarchal system by reconceptualising the very nature of maternity (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 2). Gebara and Bingemer approached the bible through analysis of myths and symbols. Under the influence of Paul Ricoeur's "hermeneutic of the self", the authors investigated the conflicts running through the very constitution of the human being. This was in order to expose how subjective contexts have been projected into the historical developments of Mary as a religious symbol and representation of the divine. Pioneering feminist Ursula King has stated that Gebara and Bingemer re-examined traditional Christian religious material "with an eye attuned to women's presence and absence, women's words and women's silence, [with the] recognition given and denied women" (King, U., 1995: 14).

According to Gebara and Bingemer's analysis (1989: 159-171), Mary's central role in the CBCs was as the protecting mother. In light of Gebara's previous argument on emerging religious experiences within contexts of immediacy, the authors explained that among those involved in the liberationist process it is the mother of God that the people have called upon to appease their suffering. Mary is the one that the marginalized petition to send them strength to carry on in their journey to liberation. Gebara and Bingemer ask, "How can this Marian piety and devotion experienced in base communities shed light on the journey of the poor, while at the same time criticizing and purifying the stereotypes imposed by traditional Marian devotion" (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 160)? In relativizing Christianity's main pillars, Gebara hoped to shake the ground used to construct patriarchal theologies through the proposal of this alternative Christian anthropology. An approach to Gebara's proposed anthropology will be further developed in this chapter.

Throughout the 1980s, Gebara's 'community theology' became increasingly evident. She stated that the new theological perspectives on Mary "affects men's hold over the sacred as private property" (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 16). Indeed, if patriarchal gender constructions are dismantled, this will affect the entirety of Catholic theology due to the fact that God, human nature and the salvation project have been understood through men's perspective. Gebara's work speaks to this normative male reality and poignantly highlights that religious experiences must be continuously rediscovered.

On the other hand, one of the many ways that patriarchy is manifested in different cultural contexts is through the prevalent hierarchical and dualistic style of thinking. By reflecting on how liberation theology started under the influence of some theologians' insistence on their right to speak – challenging First World theological monopoly – the paradoxes of the postcolonial context became increasingly nuanced and multi-layered forms of oppression revealed. Thus, feminist theologians' attempts to assert their equal rights to speak have shown how male liberation theologians reasserted the control of the powerful instead of working to establish mutual relationships. One case in point is Boff's *The Maternal Face of God: The Feminine and its Religious Expressions* (1987),<sup>65</sup> which was the book most cited by male liberation theologians when engaging women's experiences within a theological framework. Although Boff's work offered an extensive investigation on the historical person of Mary, bringing into light notions on cultural constructions of the divine, he fell into the same patriarchal trap of reaffirming feminine gendered notions of the divine and did little to challenge the patriarchal hierarchical ideology within liberation theology.

### ***The Emerging of Indigenous and Afro-Latin Centred Discourses***

During the second half of the 1980s and early 1990s, in the Latin American context indigenous people began voicing their experiences of colonial oppression, revealing multiple levels of cultural suppression at the hands of the Spanish and Portuguese. At the same time, Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Caribbean peoples also started denouncing the racism of Latin America's white and mestizo culture.<sup>66</sup> Their struggle to break localized forms of white supremacy highlighted the racist foundations of white Western systems and "the complicity of the major religions in perpetuating violence and discrimination" (Gebara, 1999: 5). The critique on racism and religious totalitarianism raised by indigenous and Afro-Latino centred discourses revealed new layers of oppression to be considered by liberationist theologians, particularly pertaining to the development of a new religious anthropology. Concurrently, it became apparent that "due to the hybrid nature of Latin America identity the line between colonizer and colonized is not

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<sup>65</sup> Boff's book was first published in Portuguese as *O Rosto Materno de Deus. Ensaio Interdisciplinar Sobre o Feminino e Suas Formas Religiosas* (1979).

<sup>66</sup> For more information on Latin American feminist Afro-Latino-centred discourses, see "Silvia Regina de Lima Silva" (Puleo, 1994: 99-114); Silvia Regina de Lima Silva's *Mulher Negra e Jubileu: Desafios à Teologia Latino Americana* (1994); María Lugones' *Peregrinajes/Pilgrimages: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* (2003). For more information on Latin American feminist indigenous centred discourses, see Eleazar López Hernández's *Teología India: Primer Encuentro Taller Latinoamericano* (1991: 273-290).

always so clear” (Gonzalez, 2004: 64). Because the colonial history forged a hybrid (and indeed contentious) anthropological context, meaning the various existing notions on the human person, the critique asserted by indigenous and Afro-Latino-centred discourses rendered visible a dimension of the power dynamics that connect racism and economic oppression operating on every theological level in the Latin American context.

As previously discussed, during the early years of the colonization of the Americas the absence of Spanish women led to violent sexual colonization and to intermarriage with indigenous women. In this way, a hybrid race and culture was born. The colonizing process was amongst other things, a conquest of indigenous labour and spirituality. Christianizing the indigenous was an attempt to give the indigenous other a chance to assimilate into a purportedly higher form of religion. This project, however, did not succeed in replacing the local cultures with those of the Spanish and Portuguese. Instead of replacement, *mestiço*, a hybrid race with a hybrid culture, was born. As history progressed, a complex hierarchical order took shape: At the top of the social pyramid were the Portuguese/Spanish-born people, then the *criolos*, who were born in the Americas, but of European parents. Descending this pyramid brings us to the *mestiços*, who were born of a Spanish/Portuguese father and an indigenous mother, and even lower were the *mulatos*, whose mothers were black-African born. At the bottom of this social hierarchy were the black-Africans, then indigenous people.

This hierarchy was often complicated by the fact that it was not always apparent to which racial group a person belonged by merely looking at him/her. Therefore, a pseudo-science developed to categorize people based on categories of skin tone, religion, culture, biology and ancestry in order to determine a person’s position in this colonial hierarchy. In “Who is Americana/o?” Michelle Gonzalez (2004: 64-65) points out how social and economic opportunities were heavily dependent on the degree of whiteness evident in a person’s skin tone. Distinctions were made even among *mestiços* and *mulatos*, as well as among black-Africans. In such a complex reality, indigenous and Afro-Latinos were confronted with the daunting task of making a case for their personhood, based on arbitrary and ambiguous racial and cultural categories. Echoing Gebara’s perspective, Gonzalez writes, “in order to speak of the diversity of the human community, theological anthropology must ground itself in theoretical paradigms that address the complexity of humanity” (2004: 59).

Feminists, indigenous and Afro-Latinos claimed that oppression is cultural as well as social. They urged liberation theologians to expand the concept of the other/poor. Indigenous theologian Aiban Wawa proposed incorporating the dimension of otherness and cultural pluralism into liberation theology's social analyses. In order to advance a genuine and holistic liberation, "the option for the poor" should be presented as "the option for the impoverished other" (in Tamez, 1995: 85). By also claiming their role as subjects for liberation, these 'other others' contributed to further develop feminist hermeneutics. In 1985 a conference on black theology was held in Brazil (Soares de Oliveira, 1995). Feminist theologians deepened the connections between socio-economic oppression and gender analysis by also integrating the categories of race and ethnicity. Soares de Oliveira stated that this was the beginning of indigenous and black feminist theological enquiry from a Latin American standpoint (1995: 65).<sup>67</sup> Particular attention was paid to the ways in which standard historical accounts portrayed non-white women as wild and weak-minded. This was further complicated by the Christian view that indigenous cosmology and African religious traditions were pagan heresies.

The informing perspectives raised by indigenous and Afro-Latino women factored in the enhancement of feminist liberation theology through a dialogical dynamic (Gebara, 1999: 5). Gebara echoed the indigenous and African-Latino's claims by arguing that because Latin America is still a predominantly traditional Catholic region, the legacies from colonial times survived through cultural anthropological arrogance. For these reasons, Gebara maintained that in order to free marginalized women of colour from oppressive social gendered roles, it was also necessary to end the existing cultural prejudice towards hybrid religious traditions. The reclaiming of black-African roots allowed women theologians, such as Delores S. Williams, to find new learning material through African religious traditions amalgamated in the Latin American context. *Candomblé*, for example, was explored to reveal how religious symbols merged and women became religious leaders (Williams, 1989). Although Christian fundamentalists marginalized *Candomblé*, this interreligious discourse developed by feminist liberation theologians validated religious experiences outside the Christian tradition and contested the stigma attached to so-called pagan religions.

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<sup>67</sup> See Silvia Regina de Lima Silva and Heitor Frisotti, *Grupo Ecumênico de Mulheres Negras...Desafios à Vistas!* (1992). Translates as *Ecumenical Group of Black Women...Challenges in Sight!*

Moreover, the connections between economic and racial exclusion was engaged in many theological discussions. This inspired Gebara (1999: 5) to search for and rediscover the face of God beyond colonial and patriarchal frames. In re-visiting colonial history and critically analysing the so-called evangelisation of the Americas, Gebara traced the roots of Mary's venerated position to the complex dialectic dynamic between colonizers and colonised. Through developing a Marian liberation theology, Gebara and Bingemer have argued that "the productions of religion are always cultural productions, as are interpretations" (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 28). Through this lens, Gebara has concurrently argued against patriarchal knowledge of religion by relativizing generalized traditional Christian knowledge about religion as also a result of patriarchal culture and interpretations. She opened the doors to ecumenical engagement as a central part of her liberationist praxis. Gebara, among others, hoped that by embracing religious pluralism and bringing marginalized religious experiences into the centre of theological discourse, the liberationist framework would subsequently integrate women's voices into their analysis. The issues raised by indigenous and Afro-Latino discourses, particularly pertaining to difference and sameness, could not be dismissed by liberation theologians in the same way that some had dismissed feminist liberation theologians' critique of patriarchal theology. For Gebara, inviting existing alternative religious cosmologies into liberationist conversation fostered freedom and autonomy to create new Christian discourses that challenge dominating systems and, in turn, develop an inclusive religious ethic.

María Pilar Aquino's work demonstrates a great deal of influence from Gebara's liberationist theology. In *Aportes para una Teología desde la Mujer (Forwarding a Theology from Woman's Perspective, 1988)*, Aquino appears to embrace and promote Gebara's plea to expand the option for the poor as an option for the "impoverished other". In 1992 Aquino published *Nuestro Clamor por la Vida: Teología Latinoamericana desde la Perspectiva de la Mujer* (translated as *Our Cry for Life, 2002 [1993]*), in which she investigated the historical, ideological and socio-economic patterns that oppress women through their relegation to the private sphere. Her investigation of the sexual division of labour from a multi-layered starting point expanded feminist liberation theologians' analysis of economic injustice.

Aquino invoked Gebara's (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 1-19; Gebara, 1989b; 1999) Christian anthropological proposal for an inclusive, unifying, realistic and multi-dimensional anthropology in order to overcome the dualism of a modern ideology that hierarchically splits

public and private spheres. Following Gebara's style, Aquino's cultural-economic analysis included an ideological critique that exposed the patterns within society that perpetuate women's subjugated role in the home and society as natural (see Aquino, 1993: 181-182).

#### **4.2 Gebara's Anthropological Proposal from a Postcolonial Perspective**

Inspired by indigenous and African-Latin women's voices, Gebara's proposal for an alternative anthropology through a new reading of the Virgin Mary emerged as a landmark within liberationist projects. Due to the fact that during the 1980s, feminist liberation theologians were strongly allied to the broader liberationist project, the main aim was to maintain the liberationist process through the CBCs. In so doing, women's feminist theological work was performed through producing a theology based on women's experiences. Gebara and Bingemer, through proposing a Marian liberation theology, not only voiced women's perspective, but also were among the first liberation theologians to interweave this new knowledge brought by the indigenous and African-Latin discourses into their theological analysis.

Nonetheless, and recognised by themselves at a later stage, the initial attempt in feminizing theological concepts reinforced patriarchal roles. In an interview given to Judith Ress in 1995, Gebara said that feminist liberation theologians' work during the 1980s was actually promoting a patriarchal feminist theology (1995a: 209). According to Gebara, the "feminization of theological concepts" and the emphasis on the "maternal face of God"—for example through the notion of *Sophia*—were not all entirely liberating for women. These concepts were valuable as part of a process of developing feminist awareness (Gebara, 1995a: 208). However, they reinforced the gendered values that feminist theologians were trying to abandon, for instance, martyrdom and women's unquestionable commitment to motherhood, which were also easily instrumentalized by neo-colonialism (Gebara, 1995a: 209; 1996: 13-23).

When analysing from a postcolonial perspective Gebara's Marian liberation theology and her other works from the 1980s, I argue that her alternative anthropology was however ahead of her time. Gebara and Bingemer's book were not an attempt in constructing the maternal face of God. It was rather an effort to forge a feminist liberationist anthropology grounded on women's experiences throughout history, which at the same time did not antagonise male liberation theologians, but rather argued their feminist point on an egalitarian basis. The authors skilfully argued against gender discrimination without falling in the same dualistic pattern that led men to

exclude women from theological discourses. And yet, via her following works, Gebara's transforming anthropology gradually debunked patriarchal gendered constructions of Mary and opened the space to liberate women from restricting gender roles. This strategy not only shows Gebara's faith in the liberationist process, but also her ability to construct theology in dialogue with the needs of particular cultural contexts.

Gebara's work, which in many ways tested the limits of liberation theology, quickly began integrating the interrelated issues of gender, race and ethnicity. From this layered lens Gebara approached colonial history through what we today call a postcolonial perspective. In Gebara's works this critical perspective is particularly evident when she engages diverse forms of religious hybridization.<sup>68</sup>

Inspired by the work of Thomas Berry, among other alternative voices within the Christian tradition, Gebara began articulating a panentheistic view of the divine as opposed to the transcendent God. By panentheism, Gebara meant the re-positioning of the divine as part of the cosmos. For Gebara (1995a: 212) we are all in all, which is the consideration of the divine, the sacred and the transcendent in every being and consequently in all.<sup>69</sup> The components of Gebara's panentheistic view can be seen in her theologizing processes of the 1980s. It was by critically dialoguing with the ways that Catholicism was imposed on indigenous and black-African peoples during colonial times that she first de-absolutized the traditional Christian understanding of a transcendent and ahistorical God. In my view, this critical development in Gebara's thinking facilitated the construction of a holistic theological anthropology and the proposal of an alternative view of the divine from an ecofeminist perspective.

Many male liberation theologians re-approached Mary from a liberationist lens, foregrounding the view of Mary as a strong woman and an example of determination and courage. In this way Mary became a symbol representing the church of the poor, a church "of people that is capable to say no to the powerful and fight to overthrow them from their thrones" (Gebara, 2009a: 20).<sup>70</sup> I have however argued in this thesis that Gebara's work on Mary was not intended to be an addition to the list of themes re-addressed through a liberationist lens. The outcome of Gebara's proposed anthropology moved beyond the liberationist re-reading of Mary

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<sup>68</sup> One example of religious hybridization is the long-silenced indigenous cosmology, centred on "mother-earth", which weaved through the veneration of the Virgin Mary throughout Latin American history.

<sup>69</sup> Gebara's view on panentheism will be explored more in depth in the next chapter.

<sup>70</sup> My own translation from the original in Portuguese.



in the Gospels; Gebara's Marian liberationist theology forged other points of discussion that were essential in grounding a feminist hermeneutic. These points, which at times overlap, constitute a challenge to Christian patriarchal and historical patterns that absolutize theological gendered concepts.

First, Gebara and Bingemer included a cultural critique in their work, which distinguished them from the initial liberationist historical analysis. In using King's words, they re-examined the colonial history and traditional Christian religious material "with an eye attuned to women's presence and absence" (King, U., 1995: 14). They uncovered the experiences of women that had been hidden from standard historical accounts. In this way, Gebara problematized all interpretations of the bible in relation to the production of cultural particularities. She argued that if interpretations are cultural productions, so were the productions of religion itself (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 28). In other words, in the same way that Gebara had an agenda when interpreting the bible, so did liberation theologians and the so-called Fathers of the Church. Gebara argued that by observing the conflict of existing biblical interpretations throughout the Christian tradition, it became clear that "interpretative conflict" also existed within the individual (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 27). Gebara explained: "we can say that the conflict of interpretations exists not only outside us but rather within us, and it is conditioned by the period of history in which we live" (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 27). In some ways, Gebara relativized the Christian tradition without denying its past contributions and stressed that biblical interpretations from diverse epochs represented new religious productions.

Second, Gebara discussed the human tendency to construct religious symbols that are actually projections of subjective contexts. From this perspective, Gebara (see also 2009a) proposed a liberationist hermeneutic that embraced Latin American popular religious expressions on Mary as an alternative resource from which to transform Christian representations of the divine and Christian cosmology. By engaging in a reconstruction of the tradition on the basis of new information and the use of historical imagination, Gebara and Bingemer re-tuned the hermeneutical circle proposed by Uruguayan liberation theologian Juan Luis Segundo—seeing, understanding and valuing (Segundo, 1977).

Third, Gebara's alternative anthropology revealed the need to develop theological methodologies that interrogate the connections between the conceptual, historical, epistemological, theoretical and political meaning-systems of religious anthropology. It was

necessary to theologise by taking into consideration the interconnected forms of oppression existing in the Latin American context. Fourth, in exposing cosmological threads from pre-colonial religious traditions within existing forms of Christian religiosity as expressed in Mary, Gebara relativized traditional Christian theology and anthropology as the only way to understand the divine. This, in turn, provided Christianity with a more inclusive and pluralistic discourse, instead of the exclusivist style perpetuated from colonial times. During the 1990s, the women participating in the *Con-spirando* ecofeminist network were increasingly encouraged to discern the old threads of their semi-lost cultures still alive in their forms of religious expressions (Ress, 1996: 51-60). Fifth, exposing the anthropological reality of all theologies paved the way not only for contestations of the traditional, absolutist, male and monotheistic understanding of God, but also of women's allocation to the domestic reproductive roles as God's will through the Salvation project.

Lastly, according to Gebara, people especially valued the maternal and protecting dimensions of Mary which gave her a special role among the masses (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 124). This claim was not only based on the manifestation of Mary through popular forms of religiosity or in the historical investigations of religious hybridization, but also on further analysis of Latin American *machista* society, which negatively impacts interpersonal family relationships (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 123-127). At the same time, Gebara and Bingemer drew on Ricoeur's *The Conflict of Interpretations* (1974) to discuss the links between the religious person and religious symbols. In the Latin American context, the absence of fathers, and fathers' lack of involvement in matters of family intimacy, the mother figure was the symbol that best represented people's vital needs in relation to the culture of immediacy. The function of the mother in society forged in the religious world of the poor an "all-embracing symbol that almost always sends out positive energy, affection, warmth, understanding, life" (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 125). Furthermore, in a context of violence, the preservation of life and protection from death is, to some extent, always a part of people's daily concerns. The protection that is enjoyed at the very beginning of life is likely being expressed in the symbolic construction of Mary as the protector of all (*ibid.*). It is through a daily struggle to survive that the lives of the poor unfold. Thus, Mary, in popular devotion, is directly connected with people's sorrows and joys. Gebara states that:

Mary has to do with children crying because they are hungry, with giving birth, with the lack of work, with a harvest that has not produced much, with one's husband leaving, with sickness, with homelessness and so many other problems in daily life. She is the relief people are longing for when they cry, "Help me, dear mother of sorrows." (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 126)

On a conceptual level, the work proposed by Gebara and Bingemer seems to invoke some of the feminists' strategies prioritised during the 1970s, namely the reclaiming of women's memories and making them visible within society. However, the work of cultivating transformative conceptions of the symbolic was done by showing how Mother Mary, a historical symbol of the one who gives birth to a child, also represents an existing all-embracing symbol of life. In this view, Gebara's (2009a: 22) work moved beyond finding creative ways of foregrounding positive aspects of womanhood in society by the feminization of theological concepts. She signalled a feminine feature of the divine lingering in the popular religiosity. Gebara argued for this aspect within popular theology as an empowering tool to be explored by feminist liberation theologies in order to construct new theological understandings of the divine. Moreover, her feminist theology never proposed to make Mary the new Goddess and it was never her intention to reverse God's gender within Christianity. Nonetheless, it is my understanding that Gebara's familiarity with the French language, and possibly her theological studies in Belgium during the 1970s, contributed to her thinking and engagement with some French theologians. Although she never mentioned feminist theorist Lucy Irigaray, there are some similarities between their viewpoints on ways to construct a more egalitarian society through re-claiming feminine aspects of the divine. This point will be discussed in a later stage in this chapter.

#### **4.3 A Patriarchal Project: The Evangelization of the Americas**

Revisiting colonial history, Gebara began to analyse the profound role that religious symbols played in the hands of the colonizers. As self-understood messengers of God, Christian colonizers relied upon the support of divine patrons throughout their conquest of the Americas. The Virgin Mary was the most sacred and beloved protector of the Spanish and Portuguese and

was invoked as a religious legitimation for their actions (Hamington, 1995: 18).<sup>71</sup> Mary was introduced to colonised people as being on the side of the colonizer and against indigenous sacred symbols. Gebara explored the combative and war-like nature of the language used to introduce Mary to the indigenous people. Iberian Catholicism was presented by its practitioners as the only way to salvation and entry into heaven. Therefore, “to pull Indians away from the perdition to which their idols were inexorably leading them, and to show them the light of the cross and the affection of the Virgin meant saving their souls and leading them to eternal happiness” (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 129). According to Gebara, the destruction of indigenous people’s sacred altars led to a process of identity and cultural loss; their religious symbols were not only destroyed, but also replaced by Christian symbols (Gebara, 2002c: 167). A process of religious amalgamation gradually began to take shape.

From the beginning of the colonization, indigenous peoples were taught that the conqueror followed the will of Mary. She was above all looking after her son’s interest by expanding his kingdom and bringing salvation to the so-called pagans (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 129-132). The image of Mary, held by the colonisers, was typical of Iberian society in the sixteenth century. She was portrayed as a submissive, docile and obedient woman. This image of Mary had repercussions beyond the justification of the colonial conquest. During the indoctrination of indigenous peoples, Mary represented the ideal woman that indigenous women should strive to emulate. The symbolism of the Christian male God further illuminated that it was through the hierarchical order of creation that humans would obtain relief from their earthly life and gain the right to inhabit the heavens. According to Althaus-Reid (2009: 9), while original sin and salvation were explained as part of God’s plan, “the concepts of a fallen nature in women after Eve’s sin [and] the idea of women as sexual temptress” was widely disseminated. The Virgin emerged as the redeeming symbol for women as she obeyed the wish of male authority during her earthly and heavenly life.

In *Teología Guaraní* (*Guaraní Theology*, 2004) Paraguayan feminist theologian and linguist Graciela Chamorro showed that the missionaries used linguistic strategies in order to reinforce their patriarchal theology. Among other works, she investigated the Guaraní-Spanish lexicon, organized by the Jesuit Ruiz de Montoya, which was systematically used during the

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<sup>71</sup> For more detailed studies on how the religious symbol of the Virgin Mary was moulded according to the dominant power in order to obtain their goals of conquest, see Boff, L., 1989; Carroll, M.P., 1986; Gaventa and Rigby, 2002; Elizondo, 1984; Gebara and Bingemer, 1993 and 1987.

religious education of the indigenous. According to Chamorro (2004: 31-116), the Guaraní language suffered some significant alterations to the roots of some words. While this appeared to be facilitating translation, it effectively moulded indigenous conceptions of womanhood and manhood to European Christian norms. Apparently, Montoya purposely modified the original Guaraní words for *woman* to introduce the qualification of woman as *bad*, and in the same way, the word for *man* as *good*. Chamorro exemplifies this linguistic deformation by showing how the phrase meaning “to desire a woman” was translated to mean “a woman inciting a man to have a carnal relationship with him”. The phrase “a dishonest man” became “an adulterous man” (Chamorro, 2002: 31; 2004: 101-103). In this way, the Guaraní’s concepts about man and woman became sexualised and tailored to suit European patriarchal theological perspectives.

Defining women’s ideal behaviour through the assumed docile and submissive characteristics of Mary went hand in hand with the colonizers violent and aggressive conquest. Consequently, powerful interplays and negotiations of the symbolization of Mary as a female warrior who stood side by side with her son also played out throughout Latin America. In particular, Gebara engaged the various ways in which Christian symbols were accepted *and* altered in the indigenous religious imaginary, whose experience of oppression visibly informed their religious forms of resistance (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 129-131).

A process of intercultural translation between Christian and indigenous belief systems arose among the second generation of colonised subjects. Gebara explains that “the worship of the mother-goddess, common to the indigenous peoples, as well as the worship of other deities, merged with elements brought along with the conquistador’s faith” (Gebara and Bingemer 1989: 131). In particular, after the mass destruction of indigenous societies and cultures, bringing about increased levels of suffering and despair, a growing veneration of the Virgin Mary began to take shape: Mary became a symbol that responded to the needs of the indigenous.

During the conquest, feminine expressions of the sacred, such as the altars of the Goddess Tonantzin—the indigenous Goddess of the earth—were identified with evil and replaced by Christian symbols representing the justice and faithfulness of the male God (Gebara, 2002c: 167-168).<sup>72</sup> More specifically, the centre of indigenous people’s religious cosmology, the deity of the Mother-Goddess, was supplanted by altars dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Gebara identified

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<sup>72</sup> In Mary’s case, her example as a mother who has been dedicated to her son above all things and was unquestionably obedient to God’s will, God has honoured her. She is the perfect example of woman, who according to the Catholic tradition did not go through death and ascended to heavens.

certain parallels with the procedures of Hebrews within the Old Testament story where the ancient female goddess of the Canaanites, Astarte, was conquered and replaced by the Sky god, Yahweh (Gebara, 2002c: 167). According to Gebara, this was a practice followed by Christians during the early historical period of Christianity and apparently enacted by the missionaries during the conquest “where the practice was to Christianize pagans’ customs and temples and then use them” (Gebara, 1989: 132). Gebara explained that missionaries strategically sought to remove what they perceived as idolatry by developing the parish system around local indigenous festivals and celebrations. In so doing, much of the earlier local religious costumes and social allegiances persisted through new cultural constructions.<sup>73</sup> However, lack of knowledge about indigenous religion and language limitations, contributed to missionaries’ ineptness in grappling with the depth and nuances of indigenous spirituality (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 132). Due to the indigenous cosmology that revolved around the mother, Mary, the mother of Jesus, the mother of God was the Christian deity closest to the indigenous divine imaginary. From Gebara’s perspective, the symbol of Mary radically altered the conditions of disempowerment in Christian Latin America. Mary was assimilated into indigenous worship of the Mother-Goddess and her representation as the “new Mother” fostered a deep devotion to Mary throughout Latin America (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 150).

### ***The Legend of Our Lady of Guadalupe***

Initially, the veneration of Mary by indigenous people was bolstered through the legendary *La Virgin de Guadalupe* (The Virgin of Guadalupe) in 1531. Near Mexico City, on Mount Tepeyac, Juan Diego, a local inhabitant, had a vision of a Beautiful Lady; she was shining as the sun, she talked to him in his own language, she called him her son and spoke about how she loved him. The Lady revealed herself as Mary the Virgin Mother of the true God. She told him how precious he and his people were, and that she would protect everyone that would come to worship her. She gave him instructions to build a church on Mount Tepeyac so that people could have a place to worship her; in exchange she would hear all the prayers made to her and give counsel to all that would seek her help. She then told *Juan Diego* to tell the local bishop what had happened and give him her instructions. Gebara argues that it was not a coincidence that this

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<sup>73</sup> John S. Spong’s *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Virgin Birth and the Treatment of Women by a Male Dominated Church* (1992) also explores how this amalgamation and borrowing of neighbouring religious symbols was an antiquated strategy used by Christians for evangelization of people.

particular mountain was chosen as the place of worship as the same destination was a pilgrimage site in honour of the goddess *Tonantzin-Cihuacóatl*, “Mother-Earth” (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 145-146; Elizondo, 1983: 24-25). Our Lady of Guadalupe therefore occupies a privileged place in Latin American popular culture and she quickly emerged as a motherly symbol that embraced the people of Mexico “and with them [...] the Latin American people as a whole” (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 144).

The legend of the Virgin of Guadalupe changed the representation of Mary, from being a colonizing tool to becoming a symbol of protection for indigenous Christians. The depiction of Mary as the female deity of Christianity was perceived by indigenous Christians as a coherent and natural interpretation and appropriation (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 150). Gebara explains how the missionaries were displeased with this situation as they viewed the hybrid-Guadalupe as a form of idolatry and heresy (insert ref). By investigating the significance of the event on Mount Tepeyac for the Mexican people, the well-known historian Jacques Lafaye argued that “The cult of *Guadalupe* was the spiritual aspect of the protest against the colonial regime” (1976: 299). As such, for Lafaye, the veneration of Guadalupe represented people’s resistance to colonialism.

Gebara and Bingemer emphasized that in Guadalupe the motherhood aspect of Mary is preserved. It is expressed when she calls Juan Diego “my son” and yet her motherly role is expressed differently from the colonizers portrayal of a docile and submissive women as illustrated when she sends him on a mission (1989: 150). Gebara and Bingemer explained that “in the land of mother-goddesses, of female fertility deities in intimate contact with nature, it is not surprising that the aspect of motherhood and everything it entails are bound up with this appearance of Mary and with devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe” (*ibid.*). Thus, “[t]he image of the ‘new Mother’ with traits of the old Indian culture are present in popular culture in a new synthesis” (1989: 150). Another trait of the ‘old mother’ through this new synthesis can be noted in the mission that Juan Diego received to build a church in honour of the Virgin. The command came from her, a woman. In general, the bible is full of references to men commanding others, but in this case a woman issues religious instructions. This interesting shift shows some of the complexity of the religious hybridization between the Virgin-Mother (white European Christianity) and *Tonantzin-Guadalupe* (Latin American indigenous spirituality). Furthermore, another cultural aspect of Guadalupe, engaged by Gebara and Bingemer, is that *Juan Diego*’s mission was announced in an indigenous language. Gebara and Bingemer argue that this move

powerfully recognised indigenous people as children under her protection and empowered the indigenous to resist, persist and fight.

From Gebara and Bingemer's perspective, Guadalupe and her mission brought hope to the indigenous people who were deprived not only of their soil, but also of their social, political and religious institutions (1989: 153). Religious cultural assimilation created the means through which the indigenous reasserted their worth and restored the power of their gods. Guadalupe could understand them, she could hear them, she "granted them a new identity and the confidence they needed to live" (1989: 153). From Gebara's perspective, the Virgin brought a new gospel to the indigenous and simultaneously merged Christian and indigenous belief systems. More so, the indigenous became 'the messenger' of this new gospel. Furthermore, the Guadalupe event provided Latin Americans with a chance to reinterpret biblical narratives, previously denied by missionaries. Virgilio Elizondo argues that Christianity was fast assimilated by indigenous people because it was told by the Virgin in their own language (Elizondo, 1984: 22-35). Consequently, a new religious discourse that was wholly Latin American emerged. According to Elizondo, Latin America's Christianity spread due to the development of local initiatives (1984: 28-29).

Gebara and Bingemer showed that while the Spaniards tried to use Mary "to achieve a religious and political integration that was more in harmony with hegemonic forms of Christianity and the dominant political power" (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 132), the message of Our Lady of Guadalupe became the origin of local productions. Quoting the Jesuit Rubén Vargas Ugarte (1956), who studied the Latin American veneration and amalgamation of the Virgin:

Mary is an idea so sublime and yet so much in tune with our being that loving her and devotion to her cannot but awaken feelings of sensitivity and nobility and the highest aspirations even in the most uncultivated hearts, disposing the soul for the exercise of virtue... this ideal of the Virgin was able to attract the attention of the poor inhabitants of our most remote regions...it inspired them with an affection that softened their customs, that made their labors, less harsh, and even made their isolation less lonely. Mary even influenced their art, so that with their rustic instruments they addressed to her the sweetest sounds, and their rough hands shaped stone and wood and erected carving in granite and cedar that



today amaze those who visit their shrines. (in Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 131)

Gebara and Bingemer argue that the devotion to the Virgin Mary always managed to stay alive within Latin American popular devotion and movements for liberation. Another example of her prominent status is found in the story of the Black Virgin (Our Lady of Aparecida), who appeared (*aparecida* in Portuguese) to a group of fishermen in the waters of the Paraíba River in Brazil, during the colonial period. The fishermen caught a sculpture of the Virgin in their net, which had become black over time. It was believed that the Black Virgin appeared so as to challenge the history of racial oppression and as such became a liberating symbol against slavery and unjust treatment of black people. The devotion to Our Lady of Aparecida spread, and she was attributed a national identity; she became Brazilian (insert ref). The Virgin brought hope to the poor and was an icon for countless liberation movements. Nowadays, Our Lady of Aparecida is a Brazilian national patroness and constitutes an important part of Brazilian heritage (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 156-158).

While Guadalupe and Aparecida instituted a particularly Latin style of veneration of the Virgin-Mother, they also represented the feminine side of religion. The Virgin-Mother became an icon that eased the suffering and struggles of men and women alike and gave them hope through her divine providence. She was also their protector. Gradually, God's attributes of immensity, healing powers, and benevolence were projected onto the "Guadalupe-Virgin" (Tavard, 1996: 248). In Gebara's work Mary re-emerges as an active warrior fighting for the rights of the marginalised. As such, her femininity, as defined by patriarchy, is powerfully reconfigured. Gebara and Bingemer argued that, among Latin Americans, Mary did not resonate with the image of an ordinary powerless woman. Instead, she was perceived as the one who gave strength to the poor on a daily basis (1989: 162).

Yet, despite Mary's prominent place in Latin American popular culture, the patriarchal social context remained dominant. Mary's biological sex did little to elevate women's status in society. As such, for Gebara it also became central to engage the patriarchal social norms responsible for perpetuating the private-public dichotomy. Henceforth, Gebara's work urged the incorporation of gender analysis into liberation theology in order to destabilise patriarchal gender norms within the Latin American context. She urged male liberation theologians to embrace a more inclusive religious anthropology so as to incorporate the lives and realities of women.

Gebara's reclaiming of Mary, as a divinity *and* as a historical woman opened the space to develop a new anthropological theology through feminist lenses.

#### **4.4 Constructing an Alternative Theological Anthropology**

Towards the end of the 1980s, Gebara was at the forefront of innovating feminist liberation theology as well as in forging a progressive dialogue with feminist theologians in the Global North. As I have indicated before, Gebara's Marian liberation theology was proposed in order to launch a new anthropology, an anthropology that would be inclusive of the religious experiences of women, including poor indigenous and black women. Gebara's new anthropology had two primary aims. First, it sought to engage the extent to which traditional concepts of God are bound up with men's ideas of masculinity. Second, it was intended to be a foundation for emerging theologies seeking to acknowledge women as religious subjects beyond the paradigms of patriarchal essentialism. Gebara appealed to male liberation theologians to seriously consider women's experiences and perspectives by showing how dominant theological discourses reflected male-centred, dualistic and one-dimensional conceptualisations, resulting in a gender biased Christian anthropology (Gebara, 1989b). The construction of a unifying and inclusive anthropology was an attempt at dialogue, while also a "possibility of finding different ways into the interior of the patriarchal institutions, in order to be able to effectively influence their attitudes" (Gebara, 2008a: 325).

Through wrestling with the enduring problem of dualistic anthropologies, Gebara knew that she firstly had to confront the pervading Western dualistic philosophy within Christian theology. This was important in order to liberate theology from the understanding that women's subordination to men is part of the divine order of creation. Gebara embarked on this liberatory quest through a critical analysis of the Platonic-Aristotelian dualistic split between spirit/body and reason/matter that was evident throughout the Christian tradition. She invoked the pioneering works of Ruether (see 1977; 1983) and Schüssler Fiorenza (see 1983), who critically engaged with the ways that the fathers of the church, under the influence of Neo-Platonism, read the sacred scriptures and defined women's nature as inferior to that of men.

Briefly, Plato understood human nature as constituted by lower and higher aspirations. The lower human nature was connected to animal appetites of the flesh, which were considered evil. The fathers of the church included sexuality under this category and therefore perceived

sexuality as evil. Platonic philosophy emphasized that ideas should be separated from substance and mind from body, thus the higher level of human nature was associated with the aspirations of soul and spirit, which were the ultimate good. According to the fathers of the church, the intellect/soul were understood to be longing for separation from the body, which in turn was perceived as the main obstacle to the soul's unification with God. Due to their reliance on Neo-Platonism, the early fathers of the church articulated a theology that emphasized the dichotomy of the body and the spirit (see Gebara, 1999; Ruether, 1998; 1993[1983]; 1977). Ultimately, androcentric understandings of the scriptures associated "maleness with mind and soul as superior, and femaleness with body as inferior" (Pamela D. Young, 2004: 168). This led to the dominant belief that women were inferior to men and also responsible for human sin after the fall: "[H]ence in this view women are remote from true ideas and from divinity. It is only through men that they can have access to the divine" (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 2-3). In Ruether's words,

[P]atriarchal epistemology bases itself on eternal unchangeable "truths" that are the presuppositions for knowing what truly "is". In the Platonic-Aristotelian epistemology that shaped Catholic Christianity, this means eternal ideas that exist *a priori*, of which physical things are pale and partial expressions. Catholicism added to this the hierarchy of revelation over reason. Revealed ideas come directly from God and thus are unchangeable and unquestionable, compared to ideas derived from reason. (Ruether, 2005: 111-112)

How can a feminist non-dualistic anthropology be constructed in a context where social and cultural spaces have been colonized and shaped by these patriarchal discourses? To answer this question, Gebara asserted that her theology begins in the domestic sphere. This is the space historically allocated to women by patriarchy. The domestic space thus became a key entry point to begin unravel and engage women's experiences as well as to reveal women's daily forms of resistance. The culture of the immediate, in particular, is visibly played out in the domestic sphere as violence and injustices are manifested in a range of different ways, from gender power relations to lack of clean water. In 2008, Gebara explained that patriarchal theologians could not realise the simplicity and the fairness of her anthropological proposal. This was so because in patriarchal societies a woman's identity was inextricably linked to the domestic sphere. For this

reason, those invested in patriarchal thought and theology approached Gebara's proposal with prejudice as they did not see the need to consider the domestic space as part of the liberationist paradigm. As a result, Gebara (2008a) articulated that most men have not taken the domestic space, as problematized by feminist theologians, seriously enough. In light of Gebara's frustrations, it becomes clear why feminist liberation theologians sought to encourage a discussion on religious anthropology aimed at enhancing egalitarian relationships between male and female.

In the same way that liberation theologians used colonial stories to demonstrate patterns of conquest and resistance in order to encourage people's participation in the movement, Gebara engaged stories of women's embodied and embedded social and religious experiences shared in the CBCs (1989a: 8). Her inclusion of women's stories drew attention to the liberationist processes revealed through women's lived experiences. As explained by Biggadike, for Gebara "the most profound kind of knowing that human beings possess—[is] that of their lived experience" (Biggadike, 2010: 327). In "*Levanta-te e Anda*" (1989a) Gebara invokes the examples of the *lavadeira*<sup>74</sup> and housewife Márcia, and vegetable seller and housewife Graça, to illustrate women's experiential knowing:

*Companheiras*<sup>75</sup> from the women's group in our community took me out from my financial hardship. With my big tummy of nine months and the sun's heat, I no longer could wash clothes for others in order to maintain the house. Each *companheira* gave me a little bit of what they had and in this way I will go on until this baby boy is born. (Márcia, 29 years old, in Gebara, 1989a: 31)<sup>76</sup>

I am sure that the government wants us poor people to die. But, we will not die. Life is stronger than everything else. See, we are even maintaining Mr Zé and *Dona*<sup>77</sup> Francisca. Every day a neighbour takes a bit of food to

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<sup>74</sup> *Lavadeira* means a woman who works washing clothes for affluent families. In the North of Brazil, where Olinda is situated, *lavadeiras* normally wash at the river banks.

<sup>75</sup> *Companheiras* is a female adjective, which meaning is similar to the word *comrade* used in South Africa during the struggle against the apartheid system.

<sup>76</sup> This is my own translation from the original in Portuguese. I have tried to maintain the language style as close as possible to the Portuguese used by those who did not have the advantage of an education.

<sup>77</sup> *Dona* literally means *lady*. In Portuguese, it is common use to refer to a person by their first name. However, when one wants to show respect to an older person *dona* is used as the respectful title before the first name.

them. Satan does not have a chance in our midst. (Graça, 34 years old, in Gebara, 1989a: 32)<sup>78</sup>

For Gebara, the perspectives of reality based on the experiences of the excluded—in this case poor women—necessitates an alternative Christian anthropology and epistemology. From the above narratives, Gebara teased out mixed expressions of political faith and popular religiosity. Her engagement with women on the margins inspired a theology that in addition to encouraging resistance and religious pluralism would also trigger critical and contextually grounded thinking.

### ***Feminist Theological Anthropology – Towards a Holistic Anthropology***

Dualistic thinking, forming a significant part of Christian cultural heritage, is problematized throughout Gebara's anthropological work. In my reading of Gebara, dualism is reconfigured through three central methodological and analytical objectives: 1) the need to develop a realistic anthropology that could serve as a unifying praxis, 2) the need to expose the inadequacy of a theological history that divided God from earth and naturalized forms of hierarchical oppression and, 3) the need to cultivate pluralistic notions of relatedness between all beings and their contextual networks. These objectives weave through the following analysis of Gebara's four anthropological categories, namely, human-centred, unifying, realistic and multi-dimensional anthropology (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989[1987]; Gebara, 1989b).

#### *From a male-centred to a human-centred anthropology*

During the 1970s, liberation theologians introduced a discussion on dualistic thinking in which their main concern was with the material/physical reality of the poor. Liberation theologians advocated that the responsibility of Christian theologians was not only to provide spiritual food (guidance) to the poor, but also to find ways to help the population fulfil their physical needs. Along this line of thinking, liberation theologians fought to unify the split between spirit and matter. Gebara (1989b: 12-13) pointed out to liberation theologians that this split was replicated at every juncture of human relationships on earth, between rich and poor, white and non-white, male and female. In Latin America, Gebara was one of the first women to challenge dualistic and hierarchical thinking on the basis of ontological notions (1989b: 13). She clarified that by

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<sup>78</sup> My own translation from the original in Portuguese.

ontology she meant “the study of the problem of comprehending being and each being as the condition for the possibility of thinking and acting in relation to concrete reality: ontology studies the very being of beings” (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 177). In this light, Gebara claimed that the traditional theological understanding of God and God’s will were a gendered projection of historical, patriarchal and cultural traits, which in turn were reflected in dualistic conceptions of interpersonal, familial, social, political and economic realities. God’s will for humankind was defined according to androcentric ways of knowing and understanding of the human person. As a result, androcentric cosmological developments placed man as the main actor in the history of salvation. This paradigm, introducing binary and hierarchical models of social relationships, became gradually normalized throughout the dominant theological frameworks of Christian history.

The reading of women’s natural inferiority and subordination to men by divine command continues to this day and is reflective of male-centred constructions of the divine (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 3). Commonly, this unequal distribution of power was reinforced by patriarchal and, at times, misogynistic readings of Genesis 3, “The Fall”, which is the source for the development of the doctrine of original sin. This doctrine became the cornerstone of attempts to perpetuate women’s inferior nature and women’s sexuality as evil (Gebara, 1989b: 27-35). Gebara’s inclusive theological anthropology is premised on the need to move from a male-centred to a human-centred framework. In her work, the idea that man is God’s mediator to humankind is destabilised so as to equally position *man and woman* at the centre of religious history. The acknowledgement that the divine’s transcendence dwells equally in both sexes makes it possible for an inclusive theology to be constructed (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 3-5).

It could be argued that Gebara still maintained a dualistic position as her human-centred anthropology did not rupture the binaries of human/God and human/non-human. The idea of human beings as bearers of divine characteristics seem to imply that in Gebara’s anthropology humanity is still filled with a unique essence that makes them superior to the rest of creation. While this critique is possibly right, it is important to note that a holistic understanding was not yet part of Gebara’s theological perspective. Nonetheless, she soon skilfully incorporated broader ecocentric perspectives addressing these issues. For example, already with the publication of *As Incômodas Filhas de Eva na Igreja da América Latina* (*The Stubborn Daughters of Eve in the Latin American Church* (1989b), Gebara replaced the “human-centred”

anthropological category with what she called an “inter-relational anthropology” (1989b: 15-16). Furthermore, although ecofeminism and panentheism were not yet part of her discourse, her insights around the interrelationships between all beings (including the divine) and between all forms of oppression was already present. This becomes gradually evident through the following points.

*From a dualistic to a unifying anthropology*

Gebara argued that a unifying anthropology rupture the division between human and salvation history (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 5-6; Gebara, 1989b: 38). By restoring unity between men and women, perceived as inseparably good and bad, material and spiritual, dualistic constructions are deconstructed (Gebara, 1989b: 37-38). Gebara and Bingemer argued that: “When we say material and spiritual, we have to affirm this reality within the limits of the material nature of history. We grasp our spiritual make-up within the limits of our materiality” (1989: 5). In the same way, theology can only be structured and grasped within the limits of human material existence. As an example, Gebara explains, “there is no love without a concrete loving expression; there is no seeking of the divine except on the basis of this history that we build and that build us” (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 6).

Through a unifying anthropology, Gebara sought to affirm the existence of *human* history, as opposed to a conflicting divine and human history (Gebara, 1989b: 38; Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 6). By arguing that “our true history is neither ahead of nor behind us, but is this history being built with sweat, blood, tears, in the unceasing advance of generations one after another”, Gebara re-positioned the divine *in* human history (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 6). As such, there was not a defining moment when evil became part of history or when the divine good emerged as the starting point of history—instead, both good and evil are part of an evolutionary process, which also includes human progression.

For Gebara (2009a: 22), the transformative aspect of Mary, throughout liberationist history, is indeed liberating. She sees the dynamics of Mary as evidence of the human capacity for creativity. In this way, her view that the divine always is part of human existence exposes humanity’s innate ability to create. Gebara states “Mary is [the] divine creation of the human...And the divine and the human will be alive, as long as man and woman last” (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 18). To seek the divine outside of the human reality hinders people from

attaining a gradual awareness of their role in co-constructing history. It also limits peoples' ability to perceive/comprehend the dimensions of mystery, complexity, creativity and strength inherent in human existence (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 6).

Gebara's emphasis on a unifying anthropology starts to reveal her approach in constructing her ecofeminist epistemology. It seems that by positioning the divine in history Gebara was also re-defining particular understandings of religion. Namely, that Gebara's liberationist Marian theology informed a theological perspective that continuously was in dialogue with historically constructed representations of the sacred. This engagement also resulted in deeper investigations into the ways in which the symbolic has been manipulated by dominant power systems. In the Latin American social context, Gebara's initial feminist liberationist attempt was to forge a unified representation of the divine that was integrated into popular understandings of the mother symbol—an all-embracing symbol. She started from the presupposition that the divine is possibly the revelation of human beings' most intimate thoughts, as argued by Feuerbach (1957: 13), or perhaps the projection of human traits developed from psychological mechanisms, as Freud explained through his theory of the origin of religion (1985 [1913]). For Gebara, however, the reconstruction of an understanding of the sacred should be grounded in, and in conversation with, people's immediate cultural and historical context. Thus, if people can grasp their spirituality within the limits of human material existence, this unifying anthropology will lead to a theological praxis that restores the realism of human physical, embodied and embedded existence (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 6). This is to say that if God became flesh and incarnated in human reality, the divine is also bearing the imprint of space and time, of man and woman, life and death, joy and sorrow, and all the conflicts inherent in human history (*ibid.*). In this view, theology brings the human to understand that through their existence they share in the mystery of the incarnation and in the responsibility of co-creation.

Similar to Gebara's proposal, Irigaray and Jantzen have investigated "the contemporary possibilities of religion for the formation of human subjectivity and as divine horizon for human becoming" (Jantzen, 1999: 88). In "On Becoming Divine", Irigaray (1996) articulated that once women begin projecting attributes to the divine that are valued within women's worldview, this would enable the subjectivity of women and facilitate women's empowerment. Along the same line of thinking, Islamic feminist scholar Sa'diyya Shaikh also considered how "diverse and fluid images of God, including sexual metaphors and feminine visages for the divine, might be fruitful



for feminists who want to explore alternative symbolic space” (Shaikh, 2012: 126). It was Gebara’s hope however, that through this anthropological discussion, men and women liberation theologians would become more aware of gender issues and gradually open the doors to a reinterpretation of the divine. By proposing Mary as the female face of God, Gebara aimed to reveal psychological and physical embodiment of male and female through religious representation and induce emancipation for both.

#### *From an idealistic to a realistic anthropology*

Gebara’s realistic anthropology represents a progression of the two anthropological categories discussed above. Gebara articulated that Christian anthropology should move beyond idealistic assumptions about human nature by drawing on humanity’s material existence and historical contexts, highlighting the dynamics of the everyday. According to idealistic Christian anthropology, “the truth of human beings is found not within history but in a world beyond history” (insert ref). In other words, the truth of human existence is found in the heavens. This world and this life remain nothing but “an interval, perhaps a ‘vale of tears,’ until true human life is made manifest” (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 7). In practical terms, such a stance has serious consequences for the present as it compromises the development of awareness of social justice and human ethical responsibility for social transformation. Because dominant patriarchal theology has grounded itself in claiming eternal, unchangeable and unquestionable truths, truths that have been revealed by God’s plan for salvation, revelation has worked over and above reason.<sup>79</sup> This type of dualism has generated two intertwined oppressive behaviours. First, it led to the domination by a minority of clergymen who believed the heavens solely destined them for the role of mediators in the relationship between humanity and God (1989: 3). Second, it led to a kind of spiritual and political conformity on part of the masses. Since people were convinced that it is impossible to change the paths already laid out by God, they did not envision a religious life where they could be their own “priests” (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 4).<sup>80</sup> Also, people became

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<sup>79</sup> This point reveals one of the advantages of a political ecofeminist theology to promote social transformation. Because ecofeminist theologians have consciously avoided the influence of a dualistic framework, their approach to the sacred is generally grounded on notions emerging from earthly experiences. By earthly I mean the material realm of reality as opposed to assumptions about another world.

<sup>80</sup> It is important to have in mind that the Catholic priest plays an essential role in the life of the parish or religious community. The priest is understood to be the link between the people and God. It is through the priest that God grants forgiveness of sin, and it is also through the priest that God reveals new instructions and wishes to the believer.

insensitive to the benefits and responsibilities involved in developing an ethical, critical awareness in relation to their own socio-cultural context.

The dualistic threads evident in an idealistic anthropology separated certain innate components (for example, pain and sorrow) that form part of human reality, from their dreamed and unrealistic future world. By excluding concepts such as finitude, mortality and vulnerability as part of an ideal future world, the Christian tradition devalued those same qualities that are realities of this world. Amongst popular religious contexts, the notion of evil was wrapped up with humanity's finite condition. That is to say that illness, pain, sadness and death were understood as consequences of sin and the work of evil spiritual forces. In this view, it could be said that the idea of a harmonious and perfect heavens is a projection of humanity's denial of their own vulnerable condition.

Paradoxically, the hope for an afterlife where there is neither suffering nor death generated all sorts of dissatisfaction with this earthly life throughout the centuries. By producing a realistic anthropological approach, Gebara saw the whole person (male and female) as constituted by good and bad elements, moments of suffering and joy, and the search for happiness. Gebara's liberationist perspective reclaims salvation for today, based on the understanding that the hope of a better heavenly future, which really means hope for a better life, starts now (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 7). Strategically, Gebara invoked human embodiment as a central component of subjectivity and as part of reality. She affirmed that human desire is what changes the world. In this way, if people "live wrapped up in the world [they] desire or project, and [they] forget to look at reality in its beauty and ugliness, its cleanliness or filth", they consequently become incapable of empathizing with other people's challenges (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 7). According to Gebara, empathy for people's suffering fosters solidarity, and this is what affects, constitutes and enables a person to reconstruct spiritual, personal or social events (Gebara, 1992 [1987]: 48). As such, subjectivity should be taken into account in the construction of a liberationist theological standpoint. Gebara and Bingemer explained that the problem with idealism "is not simply that it holds that there is a 'world of ideas' that are perfect and unchanging, but there is also the problem that from the strictly anthropological viewpoint, idealism is a more or less veiled denial of human reality as it appears to us. Once human reality is denied or hidden, it can hardly be transformed" (1989: 7).

The complexity in constructing liberationist religious symbols is revealed by considering that while the belief that suffering will end in the heavens brings comfort to the impoverished, it also fosters a form of social blindness and ethical apathy (see Gebara, 1991a, 21-36). How then do we propose to the oppressed religious symbols that no longer offer this sort of comfort while socio-economic oppression is still in existence? As Althaus-Reid (2009: 15) articulated, liberation theology's "courageous" (meaning militant) form of spirituality was important to face the risks of the 1970s and 1980s. However, the context shifted, the culture of the immediate took place and the new symbols became old. In the 1990s, Gebara argued that dualism was still part of theology and people were not prepared to deal with a new reality. Thus, they went back to the old comforting forms of Christianity.

Gebara articulated for the first time that the theological task "is not only to explain faith in God, but to explain it intelligibly at each point in history and appropriately for different cultural contexts" (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 2). For Gebara, a realistic anthropology provides a ground that supports the changing realities of human physical and social existence and observes the natural laws that govern and interconnect all life on earth and in the universe. With this perspective, religious concepts and values cannot be eternalized or excluded from their cultural background. Religious concepts are always open to new referents that history provides (Gebara, 1999: 60). By retaining the imprint of time, this perspective illustrates the life cycle of an organic ground in which life begins, grows, changes, ages, dies and is renewed (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 9). By advocating for theological developments and principles that are historically situated, as well as subjected to the diversity and complexity innate to human existence, Gebara and Bingemer elevated all life forms by stating that through a realistic anthropology we can see:

Human history in a less rigid, less static, less dogmatic manner, without any pre-established models that could be presented as valid for all cultures, provided that a few tiny adaptations are made. This statement makes it possible for cultures to meet in their differences, to relate to one another, to make one another fruitful so as continually to encourage the outbreak of what is new, while protecting different aspects, and evolving in the continuous/discontinuous flow of history. (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 9)

Gebara illustrated that by using the hermeneutical circle it is possible to construct a transforming liberationist methodology, which is sufficiently inclusive and informed by the marginalised realities and experiences of the outcasts of society. She first witnessed and then learned from the ways in which marginalised women and peoples assimilated, integrated and reproduced Mary through their religious experiences. Subsequently, forms of resistance were revealed through the ways in which the colonized kept certain aspects of their culture alive. The approach used to engage Guadalupe and Aparecida, for example, served to bridge the barriers between indigenous and Christian forms of spirituality in the feminist liberationist discourse. In addition, this approach also served “our understanding of some aspects of a conquered people who do not simply allow their culture to die but bring it back to life in other ways so that it will continue to serve them as a source of life and a compass within history” (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 154).

On a theoretical level, the methodology employed by Gebara contributes to an older discussion within ecofeminist religious debates. As discussed by Gyan Prakash (1995), among others, colonization also led to a dialogical dynamic between the colonizer and the colonized about religious identity, although imbued in particular power relations. Hence, it is crucial to any liberationist theology, including ecofeminists who wish to enter into a dialogue with Native Latin American spiritualities, to be aware of the processes that hybrid religions have been through. If liberationists do not take into consideration the ways in which spiritual traditions have been impacted by the colonizers they will be following the same pattern established by the colonizers themselves. In another words, to romanticize indigenous traditions as purely indigenous is a mistake as equally condescending as to ignore the impact of colonization. Prakash (1995) has argued that the impact of colonization is so pervasive that it continually leads to shifting indigenous identities, often disguising the effects of colonization under the illusion of an invisible boundary protecting what is mistakenly assumed by some to be purely indigenous.

At this point Gebara’s feminist liberation project and ecofeminist theological work seem to overlap. First, Gebara has voiced a new construction of the sacred by arguing that existing representations of the divine are an amalgamation between expressions of the complex human desire for infinitude, and patriarchal tendencies for domination. The debate around these themes have similarly featured in the international ecofeminist religious discourse in order to forge an ecotheology more centred on the experiences of human material reality. In 2003, theologian Carol Christ’s *She Who Changes: Re-imagining the Divine in the World* re-formulated some of

her early thinking by introducing the idea of process theology into Goddess-worship. As mentioned in chapter two, Christ does not engage with essentialist ideas of the women-nature connection, but has rather proposed the idea of mutability and changeability as an integral part of humanity. Second, if there are no eternal transcendental truths, and only one history and if human subjectivity is explicitly recognized as central to new religious constructions, then this project allows religious anthropology to be in deep dialogue with multiple contexts such as time, space, culture, problems, and actual persons (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 9; Gebara, 1989b: 38-42). The paths of ecofeminist theologians and Gebara's feminist liberation theology have crossed through advocating the urgent need to forge theologies that are responsive to embodied and embedded human material realities.

I have suggested before that Gebara's anthropological perspective allowed her a space to further develop her thinking into a panentheistic understanding of the world. Starting from the supposition that there is only one history and God is part of this history implies that physical things are not just pale and partial expressions of the divine, a view congruent with panentheism. Furthermore, panentheism dismantles the hierarchy of revelation over reason, since God is no longer understood as unchangeable and beyond question. This perspective has been adopted by Gebara primarily to make apparent theologies that are superimposed on reality become obsolete and consequently oppressive, as they create "an unreal world in the attempt to make up for the crack opening in the human heart due to dissatisfaction" (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 8). Correspondingly, within the ecofeminist religious discourse some ecofeminist theologians who have entered in dialogue with alternative understanding of the divine are also attempting to forge theological constructions that result in new religious ethical praxis—an ethics that is responsive to today's most basic needs. However, according to Eaton (2001: 90-91) the advancement of such an ethics is dependent on the collaboration between ecofeminists and liberation theologies, pertaining to their aim of defending life and to bring liberation so as to advocate a dignifying life in solidarity with the impoverished people of society. Ecofeminist theologies can contribute meaningfully to this process by offering ecological awareness, encouraging religious pluralism and constructing non-dualistic and realistic representations of the divine. On the other hand, this discussion also calls ecofeminist theologians to a continuous dialogue with different cultures and spiritual traditions. This dialogue must be sensitive to cultural differences and the oppressive

conditions traversing each context. Encouraging learning in solidarity could possibly result in cohesive strategies informing positive social changes.

*From a one-dimensional to a multi-dimensional anthropology*

Through a multi-dimensional perspective, Gebara discusses the point that traditional theologies have been unwilling to explore conceptual changes. What describes a one-dimensional anthropology is the starting point of its reflection, which is a definite and often implicit assumption about what human nature is. Most Christian theologies reflect the belief in an eternal human soul. The soul is viewed as the channel to spiritual connections and as such is perceived as the sign of human uniqueness, distinguishing humans from the rest of creation. According to Gebara, among others, this closed definition of human nature positions the human person above and apart from the natural environment (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 10). It is Gebara's view that the assumed security provided by this idealism plays a crucial role when theologians discuss core conceptual issues. Gebara argues that one of the main reasons that human evolution is taken as incidental by traditional Christianity is due to the conceptualization of the immutability of the self. Challenging this concept, challenges God's salvation project and men's superior position in the order of the creation.

In order to overcome this issue, Gebara argues for a multi-dimensional approach by adopting the position that pre-established concepts about human nature were constructed according to traditional gender roles. According to Gebara, one-dimensional anthropology gives space to male idealistic definitions based on essentialist assumptions about human nature (Gebara, 1989b: 14-15). This is the root of moral rigidity and authoritarianism within the Christian tradition. As Gebara and Bingemer state, "one-dimensional anthropology consecrates male images of God and situates man, the male being, as the first and most important in the order of creation" (1989: 10). By contrast, a multi-dimensional anthropology, in its very essence, sees dialogue with theories about human evolution as a key component in developing theological thinking that is not absolutist. Rather, it recognizes the plurality of cultures and diversity of persons as an inexhaustible manifestation of the human phenomenon. Accordingly,

The human being is not primarily a definition but rather a history within space and time. Within themselves human beings contain the animal, the vegetable, the mineral, the spiritual, the divine. They also contain good and

evil, love and hatred, peace and violence, not as mutually exclusive but in a mixture that includes all these “ingredients.” Thus human beings are not first good and then corrupted, not first corrupted and then saved, but rather humans are this whole complex reality striving to explain themselves and to explain the world in an existence marked by internal division and marked by the nature of their being, which is conflictive and simultaneously limited and unlimited. (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 11)

By revealing how men’s experiences have been superimposed as normative for all human behaviour, Gebara aims to empower women and men to construct new self-understandings in relation to God and to each other. Gebara has stated that it was her hope that the openness of feminist liberation anthropology “would become accepted in certain dioceses, with the leadership of more progressive bishops” (Gebara, 2008a: 325). She envisioned that her religious anthropology, due to its grounding in marginalized spheres, could contribute constructively to the re-structuring of religious thinking and ethics.

During the same time that Gebara’s Marian theology sought to redefine women’s position in relation to God, it also opened the doors for women to work on an emerging discourse of Christian spirituality during the 1990s. The connection between the two contributed to Gebara’s deeper understanding of the limited ways in which women’s personhoods were constructed, with alarmingly disproportionate and excessive emphasis on female sexuality. The link between biological sex, women’s identity and spirituality is a central and much problematized issue in Gebara’s theology. She began constructing a transformative theology that represented a critical and challenging view of reality. In light of contemporary political and economic systems, Gebara has exposed pre-stabilised ontological definitions that facilitated the establishment of neo-liberal projects in Latin America. In turn, Gebara’s theology intertwined with social/socialist ecofeminists who argued that each historical epoch has defined maleness and femaleness according to the main mode of production in those periods. Gebara’s ecofeminist perspective, which will be discussed more in depth in the next chapter, resonates with a profound understanding of the politics behind a gendered cultural construction of knowledge.

Lastly, in light of the discussions proposed throughout this and the previous chapter, I suggest that Gebara’s feminist liberationist theology and anthropology implicitly challenges issues of reproductive heteronormativity. Gebara (1989c; 2003a) has pointed out that women, by having their identity defined by patriarchal ideology and theology as mother and wife, have

inadvertently reinforced the status quo of capitalism and patriarchal theology, a point well explored by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in *Nationalism and the Imagination* (2010). Spivak argues that reproductive heteronormativity and the role women play in it reinforces nationalism and government control. Gebara, on the other hand, developed her critique against the ‘wife-mother identity’ without clearly addressing the issues on homosexuality or heteronormativity. While, the lack of a clear discussion on heteronormativity could be seen as a gap within Gebara’s body of work and patriarchal critique, I argue one does not have to write about everything in order to show respect towards difference. Gebara’s approach on sexuality is grounded on an understanding of basic human rights which traverses all types of sexual choices and identities. For Gebara sexuality is also a manner to show human diversity and as such she argues for a theology that has in its centre notions of diversity as well as difference. As an example, Brazilian queer theologian André Sidnei Musskopf (2008; 2012) has been charging Brazilian theological discourse for its rigid patriarchal thinking and heteronormativity as the main obstacle to an integral social inclusion of those groups being discriminated on the bases of race, gender, class, and ethnicity. Musskopf (2008: 7) draws on the anthropological work proposed by Gebara (1997b: 101-113) while pointing out his critique towards existing ambiguities expressed through a multiplicity of discourses and experiences surrounding religion and sexuality.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated the interconnected struggles of and obstacles to incorporate local experiences into constructive liberationist theologies in Latin America. I have shown how those involved (i.e., male theologians) in the daily struggle to survive can show the most resistance to the feminist principles. The challenges that feminists theologians have faced are not only related to the development of new conceptual tools, but also related to how their liberatory message can be conveyed to the oppressed and marginalized.

During the 1980s, the people involved in the liberationist process experienced an awakening in relation to the norms that attempted to define them, norms that were largely created by men. The work of redefining ‘the self’ in both individual and group terms is challenging in any context, but in the context of Latin America, the process of how to redefine women’s identities, while still embedded within a male hierarchical epistemology, turned out to be a complex task among liberation theologians. Many male liberation theologians saw the feminist



movement among women theologians as a civil and theological right to full humanity. They understood the importance of recovering women's concealed participation in the early Christian tradition as beneficial to the liberationist cause. According to Gebara, while women theologians utilised their agency to negotiate theological points with male liberation theologians, men appeared to be pleased to see women undertake a more central role in developing theology, church decisions and leadership in grassroots organizations. If for no other reason, male theologians saw women's active participation as the answer to feminist demands (Gebara 1995a: 209). On the other hand, male theologians also demonstrated a certain insensitivity and blindness to gender issues. Once feminist theologians began to challenge the androcentric threads weaving through the Christian fabric, they urged male theologians to understand feminist claims not as an additional topic within the theological discourse, but rather foundational to a theologizing style focused on achieving real egalitarian results. It then became clear how men's patriarchal foundations continued to cloud their understanding of theological possibilities. According to Ressa and Gebara, the main argument against adopting a feminist perspective was ironically the idea that less focus would be given to the marginalized and their struggle (Gebara, 1999; Ressa, 2006).

Analysing the progression of feminist theology, particularly in Gebara's work, certain methodological practices of listening to people's religious experiences as well as feminist theologians' own embodied reality as women, became visible. This methodological approach led to a series of developments in feminist theology. First, Gebara (1987; Gebara and Bingemer 1987) proposed an alternative anthropological understanding in order to include difference and diversity. According to Gebara and Bingemer (1987: 12), this feminist anthropology should not be exclusive to women but open enough to encompass male and female creativity. Second, seeking a new understanding of the self-encouraged feminist theologians to move away from the traditional trajectories of the Christian church. Feminist theologians began dialoguing with the "progress being made in rationality" by the modern scientific world (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 15). In particular, anthropological and cultural theories played a significant role throughout this process. Third, learning from other cultures and other periods in history not only exposed alternative theories of the origin of religion but also how the divine was represented in terms of gendered definitions and broader cultural dynamics. In dialogue with science and the

cosmological perceptions of diverse cultures, it became evident to Gebara how deficient it is to categorize behaviour or social roles according to perceived qualitative gendered attributes.

Feminist liberation theologians became increasingly aware of their responsibility for future generations. Awareness of their own oppression and subjugation also rendered visible women's age-old conformity to oppressive structures. Because women traditionally are responsible for the education of their children in the Latin American context, they are somewhat complicit in perpetuating the idea of a world in which there are "those who give orders and those who take them", equating the former with men and the latter with women (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 12). This gendered educational dynamic reinforces an ambivalent situation where women accept and cultivate fragile, dependent and obedient girls. This unfortunate cycle does not only victimize women but also does not allow a space for men to redefine their role based on new societal demands. Gebara's new feminist anthropology creates an opportunity for both men and women to take responsibility for their behaviour in order to co-create the present.<sup>81</sup>

The feminist critique of normative theology together with a keen attention to constantly changing cultural contexts and gender relations, illustrates how feminist theology operates on moving ground. Emphasizing biblical readings that promoted women's participation in society was an important initial step in women's theological quest for inclusivity and egalitarianism in the 1970s. Yet, Gebara also explains that the aim of feminist anthropology is to support theologies that challenge constructed gender roles and expose women's historical victimization. Gebara's theological anthropology creates the space to value and address women's experiences from gender sensitive perspectives. Simultaneously, feminist theologians claimed their space as producers of theology. Gebara and Bingemer (1989: 12-19) pointed out that even if certain so-called feminine qualities are emphasized through this process of feminist theologizing, the objective is not to create an opposition between male and female qualities. The aim is rather to forge new identities in view of the experiences of those who had previously been denied epistemological privilege.

In reviewing feminist theology during the 1970s and 1980s, Gebara (1999b) explained that women do not have to restrict their theological awakening by using the same literary style

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<sup>81</sup> In *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, Ruether (1992: 17) articulates her concerns with a sort of failing to provide a solution to the problem of male adult identities. Similarly to Gebara's point, Ruether argues that the ecofeminist religious discourse must be mindful of such issues in order to propose social changes that will benefit men and women alike.

and hermeneutic methodologies that men have used when they began acquiring knowledge. Rather they can allow their lived daily experiences and the realities of those around them to inspire and inform their theological constructions. To be accepting of difference is a more logical path to inclusivity and a more integrated way towards liberation. For Gebara (1999b: 208) to bring pluralism into theological reflection required a transformed understanding of the meaning of unity. Gebara called on feminist theologians to be self-reflective in their theological approaches and re-create theology from “the insights provided by the awakening of women’s historical consciousness” (Gebara and Bingemer, 1989: 16). In other words, Gebara called on women to not allow themselves to be restricted by patriarchal paradigmatic challenges.

Fernando Segovia has expressed that the reality of empire, imperialism and colonialism still constitute an internal reality, even in the enlightened academy (Segovia, 1998). For example, while liberation theologians encouraged resistance during postcolonial times by advocating the “option for the poor”, liberation theology also resisted readjusting its own discourse in order to benefit others—mainly women—at the margins. The hierarchical and male-normative structure established by colonialism and followed by neo-colonialism may not pressure all to the same degree. However, as Rieger (2004) similarly argued, those who are concerned with ending oppressive colonial structures must examine their reality in relation to particular and localized histories. It is through this particular perspective that Gebara’s feminist theology challenged the early claims of liberation theology and ecofeminists whose paradigms of enquiry had not yet included the experiences of marginalized women. Of course, they are not uniformly benefiting from colonial structures. However, both discourses must pay more attention to the reality of their own history and contexts, in order to realise how the presuppositions of colonialism still privilege them.

During the early 1990s, the efficacy of liberation theology pertaining to the liberation of women was critically evaluated. Some male liberation theologians supported that notion that feminist theology was not just a theological topic but a perspective from which all should produce theology (see Boff, L., 1996: 66; Pablo Richard, 1987). However, by and large, critical analyses of Christian concepts that deconstructed ideological discrimination against women were not sufficiently engaged. This resulted in escalating frustrations and subsequent theological

disagreements between male and feminist liberation theologians<sup>82</sup> However, in 1993, with Gebara's holistic ecofeminist challenge of core issues pertaining to Christian epistemology and cosmology, male liberation theologians and feminist theologians began to collaborate once again. This eventually came to a head in 1993, with Ivone Gebara's holistic ecofeminism challenging core issues of Christian epistemology and cosmology. In my view, through reclaiming the historical Mary as the Mother of the poor, Gebara revealed an unconscious contestation of the transcendent God being expressed through the religious experiences of those in the CBCs.

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<sup>82</sup> For more information on this issue during the decade of the 1980s, see Gebara's *Teologia Ecofeminista* (1997b: 50-56) or the English translation *Longing for Running Waters: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (1999b: 42-48)

## CHAPTER 5

### ECOFEMINIST THEOLOGY FROM THE IN-BETWEEN SPACES

#### Introduction

During the 1990s, Latin American feminist liberation theology entered into a new phase characterised by the incorporation of gender analysis and holistic ecological thinking. These developments fostered a paradigm shift within feminist theologians' analytical framework. Informed by feminist theories, and social ecology, those women theologians began voicing a feminist perspective grounded on women's experiences of liberation from the Latin American context. At the forefront of these theoretical developments was Ivone Gebara's holistic ecofeminist proposal.

This chapter explores Gebara's construction of a holistic ecofeminist theological understanding of humanity. Gebara proposed a new form of theologizing that centred on the intricate relationships between the human person, the divine and the earth. Her work reconfigured traditional Christian Catholic notions of human freedom and autonomy while also rendering visible 'unnoticed' forms of evil endured by women in their daily lives. Gebara's notion of 'unnoticed evil' signified the various forms of normalised and naturalised injustices that were reinforced by dominant understandings of dualistic religious anthropology. The naturalization of evil, Gebara argued, is a powerful way to maintain the hierarchical binaries that continue to inform social contexts globally (2002c).

In this chapter, my engagement with Gebara's alternative theological understanding of humanity highlights the ways in which her ecofeminist lens is a result of her liberationist trajectory. It is my aim to show this ecofeminist perspective as an effort to counteract naturalized oppression and to draw attention to her discussion of the social consequences of such an intervention. In the first section of this chapter, I engage the historical context and the overlapping events surrounding the development of Gebara's ecofeminist theology. I draw attention to the critical relationship between male and female liberation theologians, as well as to Gebara's role in increasing feminist awareness among women liberation theologians. A special focus is given to the particular circumstances that led to the Vatican's decision to silence Gebara for two years. The multiple layers of this historical context are explored in order to identify the

point in Gebara's theological itinerary that led her to move to holistic hermeneutics and epistemology. The second section explores Gebara's re-thinking of some Christian concepts in order to illuminate the subjectivity of her own ecofeminist political praxis. This section situates Gebara's transformative holistic anthropology in the ground that allows the flowering of her organic and liberating theological thinking. This moving ground functions as a form of resistance as it challenges continuously emerging forms of oppression. Through the third section, I examine what it means to be human from Gebara's ecofeminist perspective and how this reconstruction is informed by a profound understanding of inter-relatedness between all living and non-living things, such as culture and linked forms of oppression. I approach Gebara's investigations into early Christianity's religious construction of the self/soul in order to demonstrate her technique in reconstructing Christianity from an ecofeminist perspective. I argue that Gebara's ecofeminist objectives of critical thinking and political praxis are crucial in restoring human creativity and in allowing emerging ecological epistemological constructions. Lastly, this chapter approaches Gebara's insight into relatedness as an alternative resource for enhancing ecological ethics through a clear expression of an alternative understanding of the roles that humanity and theology play on this earth.

Gebara's proposal has been described as a radical form of doing theology (see Ruether, 1998: 251-254). I argue, however, that a closer look at her approach reveals that her theology is not as radical as initially suggested. I would say that it is rather an attempt to return to moderation. By being inclusive of previously marginalised religious perspectives, Gebara learned from indigenous traditions, among others, that "virtue lies in moderation" (1999b: 79). I contend that Gebara's return to moderation is her original contribution. It is through this lens that she re-thinks the nature of being and positions the human person and the divine within the cosmos. Gebara's ecofeminist perspective is grounded in her view that knowing is a continuing process. As a result, her ecofeminism is constantly developing and changing. Her reconfiguring of Christian notions of human personhood and God from an ecofeminist perspective does not imply a total rejection of the Christian tradition. Rather, she creates opportunities to revisit, readapt and reconstruct views about what it means to be human in ways that incorporate the contemporary needs of people. By engaging contemporary values pertaining to human nature and non-human nature, Gebara's ecofeminism aims to rebuild "a new balance that supports respect for all life" (1999b: 76). At the same time, Gebara also foregrounds "our theoretical and

practical uni-inability to grasp the multiplicity of worlds that make up our universe, the multiplicity of humanities that are found within what we call the human, and the multiplicity of persons who are present in what we call a person” (1999b: 70). Thus, she recognizes that our points of reference are always limited and relative. It is by embracing these limitations that liberating, constructive, fluid and organic perspectives can emerge.

This chapter is above all an effort to reveal Gebara’s ecofeminist theological work from a different angle than those existing within international ecofeminist discourse. As previously explained, only a few books from Gebara’s body of work have been translated into English; *Longing for Running Water* is the work most cited by those scholars in religious studies and theology who have been engaging with ecological matters. Kwok Pui-lan’s *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (2005) brought Gebara’s reconstruction of Christology into conversation with a postcolonial theological perspective advancing ideas of ecological justice. Maylin Biggadike (2010) has proposed, through Gebara’s notion of human and earth inter-relatedness, a new ethics for the construction of a more egalitarian economic system. Ruether (2000b) has also drawn on Gebara’s reconstruction of the Trinity, and more generally Christianity, in order to elaborate an ecofeminist theological perspective that dismantles forms of dualism in the American context. However, outside Latin America I have not come across a work that clearly articulates Gebara’s position that new ways of knowing are only possible if humanity comes to terms with earthly realities. In other words, it is from accepting one’s own limitations and losing hope of a perfect, heavenly future that the individual is able to constructively re-engage in a new understanding of the divine and enter into an alternative relationship with the earth. While such a proposal may seem to be a return to anthropocentrism, it is actually the opposite. Gebara’s ecofeminist perspective, by re-visiting the possible root-causes of anthropocentric and dualistic views, engages in liberating the individual from his/her distorted dualistic notion of superiority that has led to oppressive religious constructions. Gebara is not an ecological or environmental scholar. She is a feminist liberation theologian who has been informed by ecofeminist thinking. As a result of this process she has produced an ecofeminist liberation theology, including an holistic anthropology, which at times she refers to as “holistic ecofeminism” (1995a: 208-212). This work liberates women and nature from naturalised forms of oppression by producing alternative and relevant theological knowledge and ethical praxis.

### **5.1 Historical Background: Latin American Social Contexts during the 1990s**

During the 1990s, the demise of liberationists' socialist ideals, brought by the collapse of various communist governments of Eastern Europe, had a stifling effect on other progressive forces and popular ideals in Latin America. Additionally, the neo-liberal global order and its capitalistic economic system were being consolidated. Local adjustments to this new order were crushing the population, with women disproportionately impacted due to the ideology of the sexual division of labour (see Aquino, 2002 [1993]). Privatization, and the dismantling of the state (particularly its role as the caretaker of various sectors), excluded the masses even more. This represented an even greater challenge to liberation theologians. Enrique Dussel (1973) has explained that the capitalist system is a project characterized by its rejection of otherness. Hence, capitalism is a project of sameness and of totalitarian egoism (Dussel, 1973: 77). Although Dussel's point is accurate and appropriate to the liberationist framework, paradoxically, for Dussel, and many other liberation theologians, the construction and composition of "otherness" as a category revolved only around "the poor". There was no distinction between various groups within this category, namely, poor women, poor black people, poor black women. The poor are the vulnerable in society who are further excluded under capitalism.

As previously explained, the CBCs and the Theological Institute of Recife (ITER) had a significant role in advancing liberationist principles throughout the continent. However, towards the end of the 1980s the backlash from Latin America's right-wing Roman Catholics and the Vatican against liberation theology increased. The Vatican was concerned that liberation theologians through the CBCs were developing a parallel church. The Vatican feared that organised small groups, the church of the poor, would eventually rise up against the official church, represented by the bishops. Fearing Marxist and egalitarian principles, the Vatican stressed the constitution of the church by divine mandate and its hierarchical ministry as bound up with the sacramental order. This pressure impacted the liberationist work on many different levels, but I would like to bring attention to two specific areas. First, it negatively affected the advancement of the CBCs, which eventually became stagnant and decreased in numbers.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> For a contemporary analysis of the state of the CBCs in Latin America, see Barbara Fraser and Paul Jeffry, "Base Communities, Once Hope of Church, Now in Disarray" (2004:12-16).



Second, progressively minded bishops became increasingly, and systematically, replaced with bishops who held on more tightly to conservative values and norms. Simultaneously, the opportunities for liberation theologians to occupy decision-making positions within the Catholic institution diminished. For feminist liberation theologians this reality represented a major problem because the CBCs were women theologians' main channel to raise feminist awareness among the population. Additionally, those new bishops who considered their role to be a divine right clashed with the principles being forwarded by women liberation theologians. According to Gebara, "those bishops blocked the numerous attempts of dialogue" in relation to women's inferior position within the Church (Gebara, 2008a: 325).<sup>84</sup>

It was also during the early 1990s that ecological movements began taking shape, as it became clear that ecological issues were also a Latin American problem and not another imperialist concept imposed by wealthy nations. It is important to note that the shape taken by these ecological movements in Latin America did not follow the mould envisioned by ecologists from affluent countries (Gebara, 1999b: 4). This was, to a large degree, because of land conflicts in Latin America. Conflicts over land continue to persist in Latin America, whereas in the North these conflicts were a more significant issue for the masses many decades ago. Yet, in the Global South, land remains fixed in the dreams of those hoping to survive and improve their quality of life. "In the world of the poor, the ecology issue surfaces first of all in the form of demands for land reform in the countryside and the redistribution of urban lots in the city" (Gebara, 1999b: 5). Hence, Latin American ecological movements steered the discourse away from simply saving or protecting the rivers and forests, and directed it towards "how to live on the land, how to love it, and how to build a house on it" (Gebara, 1999b: 4). On this note, according to Gebara's point of view, the emerging ecological discourse, grounded on the realities found in the Latin American context, highlights how an unbalanced global socio-economic system has not only economically oppressed those in the South by the exploitation of natural resources for the development of those in the North, but also how the ecological degradation experienced in the South renders visible the lack of a more holistic understanding of the global ecological crisis. In Gebara's words:

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<sup>84</sup> For more information on the ongoing challenges faced by feminist liberation theology in Latin America, see Gebara's "Feminist Theology in Latin America: A Theology without Recognition." (2008a: 324-331).

The poor do not destroy natural springs or watersheds; these have long since been taken away from them. The poor don't use powerful electric saws to cut hundred-year-old trees, because they don't own chainsaws. If they do so at all, it is as hired labor, as impoverished workers—and they do so to earn their bread and beans. (Gebara, 1999b: 5)

The struggle for survival imposed on the poor exposes the multiplicitous consequences resulting from ecological degradation. While the Amazon forest alarmingly disappears, threatening the basic fabric of life for all, ironically the poor have been forced to abuse their own environment in order to obtain the basic necessities for their own survival. On the other hand, it shows how emerging ecological discourses are also subject to the experiences of the ecologists' embedded context, making once more the case for dialogical dynamics between those ecologically concerned in the Global North and South.

In an attempt to deal with the new socio-economic challenges of the 1990s and the problems caused by the Vatican's backlash, liberation theologians attending the Latin American Catholic Bishops' Conference (1992) in Santo Domingo planned to revitalize the early pronouncements and hope of liberation theology, especially ideals of egalitarianism and the promotion of an empowering socially engaged theology. According to Anna L. Peterson, the conference was however "marked by tensions between the Vatican's concern for unity and hierarchy and the Latin Americans' concrete worries, interests, and experiences" (Peterson, 1995: 865). In an effort to manipulate the future directions of liberation theology, the Vatican used the Santo Domingo conference as a venue to promote Christian culture through the so-called "new evangelization". From Alfred Hennelly's (1993)<sup>85</sup> perspective, the Vatican's "new evangelization" project ran counter to the ideals of religious pluralism forwarded by early pronouncements of liberation theology. Even so, Latin American liberation theologians re-affirmed the "preferential option for the poor". At the same time, they responded to the various forms of racism and cultural oppression that were being identified and denounced by emerging indigenous and Afro-Latin centred discourses by noting what they called the new faces of the poor (see Boff, L., 1992). Althaus-Reid (2009: 9) explained that at the conference male liberation theologians included in the category of the poor the unemployed and migrants, and they also

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<sup>85</sup> In *Santo Domingo and Beyond: Documents & Commentaries from the Historic Meeting of the Latin American Bishops' Conference* Alfred Hennelly's analysis of the Vatican's interferences with liberation theology as one of the main responsible in setting back one of the most important processes of religious renewal in Western history.

highlighted the urgent need to care for the environment in relation to the degrading conditions imposed on the poor by the ecological degradation. Yet they did not step forward in favour of women liberation theologians by problematizing women's oppression and recognizing women as men's equals. Women were not granted bigger roles in the Catholic Church. Feminist liberation theologians' attempts at the conference to open the discussion about a Christian anthropology that was also inclusive of women's experiences was largely dismissed by male theologians.

In general, liberation theologians turned their focus towards two fronts: in defending liberation theology from the accusations of a rooted Marxist ideology and on the development of themes that dealt with the socio-economic issues brought by the pervading capitalistic system, for example, "the market economy and God of sacrifice" (Boff, C. and Pixley, 1989). Alternatively, Leonardo Boff did work on the "new evangelization", but from a social ecology perspective (see Boff, L., 1992). Guided by Ivone Gebara's ecofeminist perspective, a group of feminist liberation theologians responded to those social and cultural issues by fully integrating gender theories and, subsequently, ecology, into their hermeneutic methodology.

### ***The Development of Gebara's Ecofeminist Perspective***

Ivone Gebara's theological developments can be situated against the backdrop of this Latin American context of the 1990s. In 1989, however, the conservative wing of the Catholic Church clashed with ITER, which ultimately led the Vatican to close the doors of ITER. The closing of ITER radically impacted Gebara's positioning within the theological field. Gebara, who was in the forefront of ITER's theological productions, stated: "The end of ITER caused a change in my theological and philosophical viewpoint" (Gebara, 2005a: 71). In a conversation between Gebara and myself in November of 2012, Gebara explained that the closing of ITER resulted in the impossibility of teaching theology on a regular basis, contributing to the beginning of her "nomadic life", as she called it. As a result of this experience, she became disillusioned about the church's capacity to change with respect to issues of gender. On the other hand, such experience affected the manner in and degree to which Gebara engaged with feminist discourse, as I argue can be seen through three coevolved occasions in Gebara's theological trajectory during the first half of the 1990s.

First, in the early 1990s, Gebara began voicing a critique of patriarchal theology and the limits of liberation theology in liberating women. This critique is evident in the paper that she

delivered in 1993, during the second ecumenical congress of women theologians and biblical experts held in Rio de Janeiro. Gebara argued that a true Latin American liberation perspective could no longer avoid questions of gender inequality. To address this she proposed the construction of a new feminist hermeneutical lens that foregrounded notions of relatedness (1998a: 107-117). Second, through integrating gender critique into her theological thinking, Gebara helped to bridge the divide between North and South by voicing her gratitude to and wish for dialogue with First World feminist theologians (see 1994a; b; c). In addition, she embraced ecological matters and took a bold position by voicing ecofeminist critique and challenging the very foundations of Christianity, in particularly the transcendent understanding of God (1993: 172-186). Third, Gebara made a daring public statement against the Church's proscription of abortion in 1993 that led to the Vatican's decision to silence her for two years.

### *Shifting of Paradigms in Gebara's Feminist Liberation Theology*

During the early 1990s, the worsening of poor women's socio-economic conditions, combined with increased gender awareness among feminist theologians, led Gebara, among others, to become more vocal about issues of sexual dignity and sexual ethics, including the decriminalization of abortion and birth control (Gebara, 1997a: 3). While discussing these issues, three events unfolded together in 1993, directing Gebara's theological trajectory. These were: the clear feminist standpoint adopted by Latin American women liberation theologians during the second ecumenical congress of women theologians and biblical experts held in Rio de Janeiro; the construction of a new understanding of the divine; and the interview that Gebara gave to the Brazilian national magazine *Veja* (See) on the legalization of abortion.

The ecumenical congress of women theologians and biblical experts in 1993 represented a landmark in Latin American feminist liberation theology. According to Tamez, the congress favoured the reconstruction of all paradigms of enquiry by urging an "anti-patriarchal hermeneutical approach" in order to foster an "inclusive and non-patriarchal theology" (1995: 84). Gebara's delivered paper, "Hermenéutica Bíblica Feminista" (Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics), was central to the advancement of this new phase of feminist liberation theology.<sup>86</sup> Gebara (1998a: 107-117) explained that it was time for a paradigm shift of the

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<sup>86</sup> The conference papers were published in *Entre la Indignación y la Esperanza. Teología Feminista Latinoamericana* (1998), edited by Ana María Tepedino and María Pilar Aquino.

liberationist values, which should start by contesting patriarchal anthropology and cosmology within Christianity. These ideas were not solely brought to the table in order to ameliorate women theologians' positions in society or theology. There was a shift in the axis of Gebara's feminist argument. She was no longer only claiming women's equal right to produce theology, but she was now demonstrating their equal ability for theological production by expressing notions of difference/otherness. From the 1990s, notions of difference/otherness shaped feminist theological thinking. Identifying "a hermeneutical problem in practice," Gebara (1993: 174) called attention to the lack of debate on difference/otherness in general liberationist discourse, which was reflected by liberation theologians' inability to open its hermeneutical nexus to engage the needs of poor women as different from the needs of poor men. Moreover, in "The Face of Transcendence as a Challenge to the Reading of the Bible in Latin America" Gebara (1993: 172-186) elaborated on this idea of "a hermeneutical problem in practice" by arguing that such a hermeneutical impasse in the liberationist discourse was partially due to unchallenged notions of a dualistic representation of the divine, as will soon be discussed.

From a postcolonial perspective, Gebara's argument reverberated with a broader concern: As long as hierarchical and binary models of relationships persisted as the main archetype for human relations, Latin Americans would continue to subscribe to a colonial model of relationships. If liberation theologians' concern indeed was to unearth and eliminate all forms of colonialism and neo-colonialism, then they also needed to reflect on the parallels between colonial relationships and patriarchal and hierarchical behaviour. Liberation theology needed to reflect on the patriarchal past of Catholicism on the continent. Althaus-Reid explained that the Church should assume responsibility for having produced a symbolic discourse that married divinity to patriarchal structures and systems of power (Althaus-Reid, 2009: 10). Gebara argued that liberation theology's inability to agree that women had been an object of domination and oppression in capitalist-driven societies represented a denial of their own hermeneutical circle, but above all a failure to recognize unresolved issues surrounding the self/other dualism (1993: 178-181). Gebara challenged the patriarchal foundations of Christianity by proposing a "holistic ecofeminism" that took seriously the interconnection between human embodiment and material realities as an epistemological and anthropological alternative to liberation theology.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Although Gebara's proposal to construct a new methodology for a feminist hermeneutics was first voiced through her paper "Hermenéutica Bíblica Feminista" delivered in the women's conference in 1993, the conference papers

### *A New Proposal for Feminist Hermeneutics*

Gebara has highlighted ways to construct a holistic feminist hermeneutic around the concepts of equality and difference. Her hermeneutical proposal interweaved notions of holism and ecology into an interrelated conception of the relationships between divine-earth-human. Her proposal was deliberately framed in very simple terms, envisioned to be further developed through dialogue with feminist theologians from different cultural contexts and to be accessible to the laity.

From an ecofeminist perspective, her hermeneutics focused on contesting systemic forms of interlinked social and cultural domination. Gebara's approach is influenced by the cultural-symbolic analysis, developed by Northern ecofeminists, and the socio-economic analysis developed by Latin American feminist liberation theologians. Her hermeneutical framework was also inspired by green scholars critical of mechanistic thinking. In the background of her work, one can also trace the influence of the geologist Thomas Berry (1991), the mathematics cosmologist Brian Swimme (1984) and the physicist Fritjof Capra (1982), among others.

Initially, Gebara argued that the prevailing sexual division of labour in Latin America was a manifestation of intertwined forms of oppression, historically carried over from colonial times. Through ecofeminist analysis, Gebara insisted that the sexual division of labour had fostered unbalanced and gendered models of relationships between humans and nature. Gebara explained that bringing ecology to the theological discourse assisted in the investigation of the many ways that the religious person relates to others under the influence of the mechanistic and instrumentalist logic of domination introduced by capitalism. Such an approach renders visible the various ways in which the religious person contributes to the ecological crisis.

Several dimensions emerged pertaining to this human-nature interrelationship. First, Gebara held that hermeneutics is a holistic work, which has inter-relatedness as its starting point. This takes into consideration the various forms of religious expression as resulting from the human, non-human and culture relationships, in motion (1994b: 30-31). Interpretation is a

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were only published in 1998, in *Entre la Indignación y la Esperanza. Teología Feminista Latinoamericana* (1998), edited by Ana María Tepedino and María Pilar Aquino. However, the hermeneutical guidelines proposed by Gebara were also elaborated in *Teologia em Ritmo de Mulher* (1994b: 27-39). Although Gebara has used the term 'feminist hermeneutics' to articulate her proposal, I would rather translate her proposal by calling it 'holistic feminist hermeneutics', due to the fact that it is an attempt to deconstruct all forms of dualistic thinking, starting by repositioning the divine and the human in the cosmos. Gebara's notion of inter-relatedness of all beings underpins this proposal.

distinctly human characteristic, one in which a text is channelled through one's own context, filtered through one's own subjectivities. Biblical texts have been read and interpreted differently by each period of history, according to the dominant paradigms of knowing from each respective time and according to the subjectivities of the individuals exercising hermeneutical tools. Gebara explains that accepting these subjectivities does not necessarily take away from the divinity ascribed to God, but can increase the appreciation for human finitude and vulnerability within social contexts. The contrary posture ignores the distance in time and space between the authors of a text and the interpreters (1994b: 33). Feminist hermeneutics enters into this conversation by emphasising women's reality and experiences. There are two different levels integrated into this holistic feminist hermeneutics, which Gebara (1994b:31) has called 'regionalist' and 'universalist': 1) the focus on 'regionalist' is contextual—in essence, a holistic feminist hermeneutics is contextualizing processes of knowing, which must not be mistaken by biologizing knowing. Human knowing is regional/local, and as such feminist hermeneutics must engage with the cultural-economic realities that are responsible for shaping men and women's experiences and subjectivities; 2) the 'universalist' focus is marked by the interrelationship between humans and nature. This perspective takes into account the transcendent reality of knowledge. By transcendence, holistic feminist hermeneutics affirms that subjective positionalities in relation to textual interpretation are also under the influence of the interpreter's "located way" of understanding his/her place and role in relation to the cosmos, the earth and all-living beings. Gebara is stressing the local character of knowing and the limitations of being spatiotemporal as the universal aspect that all forms of knowing have in common. Gebara stated: "what is most universal about knowing is not the type of content that is learned, but the 'located' way in which we learn the universality that marks as all" (1999b: 62). It is through this tension between contextualized and universalized perspectives that Gebara foresees ecofeminist theology escaping from universalized conceptualizations. The hermeneutical criteria applicable to a group in Brazil cannot be the same in Africa due to the immediate context in which our knowing evolves (Gebara, 1999b: 61).

Second, Gebara reminds us that culturally constructed gender roles have been historically re-adjusted according to patriarchal interests. Because these interests stemmed from biological, cultural and economic factors, it is only logical that those factors are also taken into consideration in any liberationist hermeneutical analysis. Gebara (1994b: 35-36) thus proposed a

feminist hermeneutic that would rework Christian symbols according to contemporary questions so as to overcome patriarchy. The innovation lies with Gebara's insistence on shifting the power away from one racial/ethnic/gender group to those who were once denied the option to construct their own Christian symbols.

Gebara claims that holistic feminist hermeneutics must be an effort to value the human from an egalitarian perspective. As one example, through a process of deconstruction and reconstruction, the person of Jesus or Mary can be re-interpreted in a manner that equally empowers men and women. Jesus and Mary are both figures with qualities that can be equally incorporated by men and women. Feminist hermeneutics can introduce their strength, weakness, wisdom and agency as equally part of the male and female human experience. In general, men can learn from Mary's human qualities as much as women can learn from Jesus. Because religious symbols are representations or expressions of how a society is structured, the efforts to produce egalitarian religious representations are intertwined with efforts to achieve social justice. At the same time, feminist hermeneutics also works towards restoring the value of women's bodies. Because feminist hermeneutics aims to move beyond dualism, the symbols that have negatively placed women in an inferior position are gradually transformed (1994b: 37).

Third, Gebara (1994b: 38-39) challenges the interpreter to work beyond conventional constraints to develop a holistic view of ethics. This holistic ethical perspective must be open enough to engage in intra-religious dialogue, with the hope of progressing to inter-religious dialogue. This is an "intra" dialogue between one's work and one's own contemplative abilities. By acknowledging how dialogue within can lead to dialogue among adherents of different traditions, the interpreter becomes an active participant in a new way of learning and transmitting knowledge.

Gebara's holistic hermeneutical proposal emerged as a significant contribution to the feminist theological work developed in Latin America and to international ecofeminist religious discourse. By incorporating ecofeminist critique, Gebara began investigating the separation of humans from nature and the divine, and the anthropocentrism that permeated religious discourses in Latin America. Her approach contributed to the enhancement of ecofeminist religious perspectives in postcolonial Latin America as she engaged the local factors that produced relationships of domination.



Ecotheologians, male and female, Northern and Southern, have investigated how the juxtaposition of women and nature influenced the development of Western theology and, in turn, shaped socio-cultural contexts. Gebara, however, argued that although ecotheologies are a significant step towards fostering an alternative relationship with the earth, if dualism is not contested from its theological core, new forms of oppression will emerge. If ecotheologies do not engage in a new construction of the divine, humanity will struggle to develop a new understanding of their own ethical responsibilities to the earth and to each other.

As demonstrated in chapter four, in the beginning of Gebara's feminist trajectory she critiqued liberation theologians' position of only seeing women's contribution as an "accent", as Gutierrez (see Gutierrez, 2003b: 295) has called it. In 1993, in "The Face of Transcendence as a Challenge to the Reading of the Bible in Latin America," Gebara (1993: 172-186) critically engaged with the fact that liberation theologians failed to incorporate gender theories into the core of their liberationist praxis by exposing dualistic reflections in the image of "God as liberator [and] as avenger of the poor" (Gebara, 1993: 174-175). Drawing on Feuerbach (1957), Gebara (1993: 174-177; 1999b) claimed that the traditional view of God was a human expression that had been developed under the influence of dualistic and patriarchal thought. This dualistic construction of God revealed a power struggle between humanity and the heavens. It is important to point out that despite Gebara's critique she never denied liberation theology's significant contribution to the continent. She praised liberation theologians for re-defining the social nature of sin and their more collective and inclusive understanding of God (1993: 175-177). Nonetheless, Gebara contended that by leaving this notion of hierarchical domination uncontested at the centre of theology "the heart of the unjust organization of our societies" was left unchanged (2002c: 52). In other words, neither male theologians nor feminist theologians had succeeded in de-constructing the historical dualistic construction of God as the almighty, located in heaven, who has control over the entire human history. From Gebara's perspective, such understanding of God provided the basis for continued oppression and exploitation, even after the end of formal colonialism or after the abandonment of military control over the poor (1993: 174-175). These colonial and imperialist types of patriarchal action were fraught with ambiguities that stemmed, at least in part, from dualistic understandings of the divine and the self. With this argument, Gebara argued that liberation theology was not yet re-defined to the

degree that it liberates individuals to think outside of patriarchal epistemologies, which consequently maintained hierarchical thinking (Gebara, 1995a: 209).

Tamez (1995) explained that Latin American feminist liberation theologians agreed to re-work their understanding of the Christian pillars of Christology, the trinity and ecclesiology. Latin American feminist liberation theologians recognized that the implications of re-reading the great theological themes would deconstruct traditional Christian theological paradigms (Tamez, 1995: 86). The re-reading and reconstruction of the main theological themes from a feminist perspective also challenged patriarchal cosmology and epistemology. In developing a new theological proposition and language, in continuous dialogue with the experiences of poor women and indigenous/Afro-Latino populations, some feminist theological circles started to address God “by non-gender-specific names such as infinite grace, mercy, or energy” (Tamez, 1995: 86). Gebara, among others, began to work on a re-reading of redemption (see Gebara, 1994b: 57-80) and resurrection (see Gebara, 1993: 178-181), without the sacrificial framework, as well as re-adjusting the principal Christian symbols, such as the trinity, to meet today’s needs of inclusivity and freedom.<sup>88</sup> Re-evaluating the earthly sacrificial role of Jesus and Mary was intended to free “poor women from accepting violence, especially domestic violence, as somehow ‘the will of God’” (Ress, 2006: 12). Feminist liberation theologians creatively reconstructed their reading of the sacred texts as an attempt to listen to women’s silenced voices (see Tamez, 1994: 190-201).<sup>89</sup>

### *The Interview with the Magazine Veja on Abortion*

Gebara’s bold statements in relation to theological reconstructions and women’s liberation resulted in a complicated relationship between her and the Vatican. The relationship became increasingly tense when Gebara’s liberationist views on abortion were first published in 1993 by the Brazilian national magazine *Veja* (See). Through the interview given to *Veja*, Gebara became the first liberation theologian to argue that abortion is not necessarily a sin. In the interview Gebara highlighted the contradictions existing within patriarchal theologies, which do not allow a space for women’s experiences to be taken seriously and yet remain unchanged in the face of

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<sup>88</sup> See Gebara’s *Trindade Palavra Sobre Coisas Velhas e Novas: Uma Perspectiva Ecofeminista* (1994c) for her ecofeminist re-thinking of the representation of ‘trinity’ within Christianity.

<sup>89</sup> For examples of reconstructed texts from a Latin American women’s perspective, see *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader*, edited by Ursula King (1994).

the undignified realities lived by poor women throughout the Brazilian slums. The issue of legalisation of abortion was implicitly advocated when Gebara argued that any woman who is not emotionally or psychologically prepared to bear a child should have the right to end her pregnancy (*Veja*, 1993: 3). Gebara was making a political argument by drawing attention to the connected contexts of poverty, illness, and death within the big cities of Brazil. Her point was to problematize the main argument being used against abortion, namely, the defence of life, by bringing attention to the increase in female deaths resulting from complications of illegal abortions (see Vuola, 2002: 18). Moreover, Gebara argued that by forbidding abortion the church was contributing to the difficult circumstances and lower quality of life as a result of unwanted pregnancies (*Veja*, 1993: 7). In this interview, Gebara also advocated for women's rights over their own bodies, defying the official position of the Roman Catholic Church.

After Gebara rejected the chance of a public retraction and all other demands requested by the President of the Conference of Bishops of Brazil, the bishop from Recife forwarded the case to the Vatican's Congregation of the Doctrine and Faith, which resulted in the start of an extensive review of Gebara's theological writings, interviews and courses (Gebara, 2005a: 151). On June 3rd 1995, Gebara was instructed to abstain from speaking, teaching and writing for a period of two years. She was ordered to move to Belgium and to commence theological re-education. During that time Gebara obtained her second doctoral degree, this time in Religious Studies. During the years that Gebara went through her "theological re-education" in Belgium she finished writing *Teologia Ecofeminista: Ensaio para Repensar o Conhecimento e a Religião*, published in Portuguese in 1997 (*Ecofeminist Theology: Considerations for Rethinking Knowing and Religion*, 1997b)<sup>90</sup> and in English as *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (1999b). After her return to Brazil her doctoral thesis was published first in French, *Le Mal au Féminin: Réflexions Théologiques à Partir du Féminisme* (1999a), and in Portuguese as *Rompendo o Silêncio: Uma Fenomenologia Feminista do Mal* (2000e). It was only translated into English in 2002, entitled *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation* (2002c), although the title literally reads *Breaking the Silence: A Feminist Phenomenology about Evil*. I would say that through these works, and particularly the latter, Gebara indeed broke the silence. It seems that while Gebara was undergoing "theological re-education", she found a space

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<sup>90</sup> My own translation of the title.

that allowed her to fully express her theological thinking in a way that showed a profound sense of intellectual freedom.

Gebara's interview highlighted the problematic relationship between the Brazilian socio-cultural context and the Christian traditional religious values that had shaped it. From the early 1980s, Brazil was going through a process of democratization and with it the secular feminist movement was gaining momentum and voicing its political views. In 1979 *The Commission against Violence against Women* was created and subsequently organized national campaigns promoting awareness of gender violence (Rago, 2010: 11). Gebara's interview became immediately notorious through her daily appearances in the media as "a freira do aborto" (the abortion nun). The interview dealt principally with violence against women, the lack of options for poor women, and the common occurrence of what Gebara called "verbal abortion", meaning the abandonment of mother and child by the father (*Veja*, 1993: 8). Yet, the media was fixated on the fact that a Catholic nun spoke publicly in favour of abortion, contradicting formalized religious values. Although it was common knowledge in Brazil that *Veja* was a secular and pro-human rights magazine, the interview demonstrated underlying gender prejudice, which clouded the main points of the interview by sensationalizing Gebara's position on abortion. The interview was published under the title "Catholic nun states that the prohibition of abortion is hypocrisy from the Church that jeopardizes poor women" (*Veja*, 1993: 7). Rago noted that the title assigned to the interview gave the wrong impression about what Gebara said. A more accurate title, according to Rago, would have read, "Catholic nun states that abortion is not necessarily a sin and speaks about hypocrisy within the Church" (Rago, 2010: 10).<sup>91</sup>

In Latin America, the Catholic Church still wields significant power over people's lives and the shaping of culture. Gebara (*Adital*, 2012)<sup>92</sup> has argued before that social and religious change are intrinsically connected. With this in mind, I argue that the ambiguous relationship between social, cultural and religious dynamics in the Brazilian context was also illustrated by the biased positioning of the magazine, through the fact that one of the first comments about Gebara's life was the collaboration between her and feminists from the First World (*Veja*, 1993: 7). It is possible that this point represented an allusion to a commonly held belief that feminism

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<sup>91</sup> For more information on the interview, see Nanne, K. and Bergano, M. "Aborto Não É Pecado." (Abortion is not a Sin) *Veja* 26 no.40 (1993): 7-10.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with Mariana Carbajal in 2012, "Uma Clara Opção pelos Direitos das Mulheres. Entrevista com Ivone Gebara." *Adital* (30 July 2012).

and the struggle for women's rights over their own bodies were First World, white, or affluent inventions. The irony is that the very restrictive morality around sexuality has been demonstrated to have been imported by the colonizers, and even currently managed from the Vatican. Yet the dualistic framework was imposed to situate Catholic ethics surrounding abortion and sex as domestic, and the fight for gender equality as foreign. In an e-mail from Gebara to myself in 2011, Gebara related that her interview was distorted and that the topic of abortion actually only came up after the interview was over and presumed to be off the record. I would say that the approach used by *Veja* is a classic example of the pervasiveness of dualistic thinking that causes issues such as disturbing socio-economic oppression to be overlooked in favour of sensationalist news that supports the dominant framework.

The correlation between Gebara's silence and the Vatican's subsequent re-statement against abortion, in my view, represents an unspoken disdain towards women's context of death. This can be seen by the fact that during those months the issues raised by Gebara were never publicly re-addressed by *Veja*, nor were governmental actions taken to ameliorate women's reality. The paradox of a socio-political context that supports the defence of life by arguing against abortion and at the same time closes its eyes to the inhuman conditions of poor women is one of the clearest forms of injustice forged by a patriarchal theology.

### ***The Dialogical Nature of Feminist Theology's Circulation of Knowledge***

In 1995, Elsa Tamez (1995) tracked the development of feminist liberation theology through the 1970s and 1980s up to 1995. Tamez's reflections highlighted the expectations that emerged among Latin American feminist theologians after the second women's congress in 1993. Gebara's ecofeminist theology was perceived to become a guideline for further feminist theological development during the 1990s. Tamez explained, "Very little material exists for this third phase but we may count especially on the input from Ivone Gebara's latest publications" (1995: 89). However, soon after Tamez' publication, Gebara was sent to her theological re-education in Belgium. Besides impacting the continuing development of feminist theology in the Latin American context, Gebara's enforced silence also attracted the attention of many feminist theologians internationally, which in my view reveals the dialogical nature of feminist theology's circulation of knowledge.

In reflecting on the exchange of knowledge between Gebara and feminist theologians situated in the Global North and South, while also taking into consideration Gebara's role in guiding the construction of a more inclusive feminist theology in Latin America, a global dialogical dynamic is revealed. Knowledge circulation emerges in this context as an empowering and inspiring endeavour. On one hand, the transforming developments experienced by feminist liberation theologians in the South during the 1990s coincided with the transforming of viewpoints of Northern ecofeminists during the 1990s (discussed in chapter two), and in-between the two was Gebara's own transforming liberationist process. It is in light of the changes lived by global feminist theologians that I invoke the Comaroffs' (2012) perspective on interrelationality between Southern and global productions. According to the Comaroffs, Southern scholarly production is partially a reproduction of interconnected social, economic, cultural and political dialectic processes of a global world in motion (2012: 47). In the context of this thesis I am invoking this perspective to illuminate the feminist theological intersections laid out above. The transformation of viewpoints experienced by feminist theologians in the Global North and South are similarly a product of the everyday social and cultural processes of their own contexts, and partly a dialectical product of a world in motion that influences local processes. This global and dynamic process is empowering as it renews hope in social transformation through responsible dialogue. It also contributes to transcending the very dualism of North and South, as explained by the Comaroffs (20012: 47). The acknowledgement of this enhances ecofeminist religious discourse through identification with local productions. In other words, as explained by Gebara through her proposed holistic feminist hermeneutics, if feminists recognise that the only certain aspect of theology is the contextual reality to which all biblical interpretations are subject, then the production of a global ecofeminist theological praxis might lead to informing social change.

Gebara's feminist thinking and positioning on a global level reveals forms of resistance emerging from global feminist theological discourse. This is evident in the fact that the actions taken by the Vatican did not close the door on the issues Gebara had brought to the forefront, nor could the Vatican silence all the feminist theologians who took notice of Gebara's affront to the Church's authority. Her holistic ecofeminism served as new ground for women seeking an alternative theological framework.

Before Gebara left for her theological re-education, she had begun to re-read the Christian tradition from an ecofeminist perspective. In 1994, *Trindade Palavra sobre Coisas*

*Velhas e Novas: Uma Perspectiva Ecofeminista* (Trinity a Word about Old and New Concepts: An Ecofeminist Perspective, 1994c) brought to the fore a re-interpretation of the trinity and cosmology. In *Teologia em Ritmo de Mulher* (Theology According to Women's Rhythm, 1994b) she proposed a re-reading of Adam and Eve from a holistic anthropology and a reconstructed Christology. In the latter work, Gebara acknowledged the ecofeminist voices of Rosemary R. Ruether and feminist theologian Dorothée Sölle, as well as the hermeneutic of suspicion introduced by feminist theologian Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, for enriching her own feminist views (Gebara, 1994b: 6). Gebara's dialogue with feminist theologians and ecofeminists situated in the Global North alludes to a process of bridging the theological polarization developed during the liberationist movements from the 1960s. During the time that Gebara was silenced by the Vatican, Ruether published the anthology *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism and Religion* (1996), which featured Gebara's "The Trinity and Human Experience: An Ecofeminist Approach", among other Latin American, African and Asian ecofeminists' works.<sup>93</sup> Ruether's initiative mediated Gebara's voice internationally during her time of silence, implicitly revealing an international feminist network resisting the Vatican and its forms of patriarchalism. In 2000, Ruether's "Ecofeminism: The Challenge to Theology" (2000b) included reflections on Gebara's proposed Christology published in Spanish as *Teología al Ritmo de Mujer* (1995b).<sup>94</sup> One of the benefits of this circulation of ideas, across North-South geographies, was the enhancement of ecofeminist religious discourse in the North. This is exemplified by Ruether (1996: 1-8), who integrated both socio-economic and cultural-symbolic analyses in her ecofeminist work.

Another example is the Finnish feminist liberation theologian Elina Vuola's work (1997; 2002). Vuola pointed out the contradictory nature of liberation (praxis-oriented) theology in debates on the legalization of abortion in Third World countries (2002: 218). Vuola's argument centred on liberation theologians' ethical reasoning and action as fundamental elements to their methods. However, they had ignored the fact that "one of the first causes of death for women of reproductive age all over the Third World, including Latin America, is the complications after

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<sup>93</sup> Here I am using the word "ecofeminists" in a broad sense. The authors who featured in Ruether's book did not all call themselves or their work ecofeminism. However, they all show a clear concern about the environment from a feminist perspective.

<sup>94</sup> Ruether's article was published in *Christianity and Ecology* (2000b: 96-112), which is part of a renowned project that has covered the topic on religion and ecology within the main world religions, published by Harvard University Press.

illegal abortion” (Vuola, 2002: 18). Vuola strongly argued that to advocate against the death of poor women never formed an explicit part of liberation theologians’ agenda. Vuola acknowledged Gebara’s work and her courage to raise the issues that were important to the people but inconvenient for the Church (Vuola, 2002: 141).

The force of Gebara’s feminist liberation theology and ecofeminist perspective not only caught the attention of ecofeminist theologians situated in the Global North, but also introduced profound changes to feminist hermeneutics in the Latin American context.<sup>95</sup> Gebara’s reflections on human nature and human relationships to the natural environment opened the space to forge new tools and ecological ethics. Gebara’s consideration of ecological principles together with theological constructs resulted in a paradigm shift in Christian cosmology. María Pilar Aquino (1993) and Judith Ress (2006) argued that an adequate praxis of liberation must entail a continuous critical analysis of the historical and ideological, and consequently, the socio-economic forces, that informed women’s oppression. The neo-liberal global market economy does not only privilege an elite white population, but also a male population. Echoing Gebara’s views on injustice within the domestic sphere, Aquino argued:

The masculine theological focus has covered up the oppressive relations lived in the private area, and concealed relationships of domination exercised in the domestic sphere, where it is women who always endure the worse part. Ordinary daily life for an androcentric vision does not have epistemological value, nor does it form part of its attempts to understand the horizon of reality, that is, it does not influence the doing of theology. What, in effect, happens here is that the masculine theological focus grants a character of *naturality* to private, everyday life. (Aquino, 1993: 146)<sup>96</sup>

The points raised by Aquino (2002 [1993]), Vuola (2002), and Ress (2006) reflect the influence of Gebara through their insistence that a praxis-oriented methodology for current contexts must start where the culture of the immediate reveals itself most starkly, in the domestic sphere. These scholars also incorporate Gebara’s anthropological argument that patriarchal theology and epistemology maintain dualism in the public and domestic spheres through rendering the sexual

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<sup>95</sup> In *Lluvia Para Florecer: Entrevistas Sobre el Ecofeminismo en America Latina*, Judith Ress (2002) interviews Latin American scholars and religious women who have been transformed by the ecofeminist proposal. Throughout the book Gebara’s name is invoked several times as one who has greatly contributed to this transformative process within feminist hermeneutics (see 2002: 74; 95; 224).

<sup>96</sup> Emphasis in original.



division of labour as divine command. Furthermore, they agree with Gebara's ecofeminist critique that dualisms are naturalized and unconsciously exercised over generations.

From the mid-1990s, two currents of feminist liberation theology became clearly identified: feminist biblical hermeneutics<sup>97</sup> and ecofeminist liberation theology.<sup>98</sup> Ecofeminist liberation theologians incorporated Northern ecofeminists' critique of dualism and hierarchy as signifying features of Western religious traditions. The establishment of ecofeminist theology in Latin America overlapped with Gebara's conflicts with the Vatican, culminating in her forced exile. While Gebara was in exile, the largest ecofeminist network in Latin America and perhaps the world, *Con-Spirando*, was formed in Chile. Co-founder Judith Ress (2003: 159) claimed that Gebara's work, vision and example played a fundamental role in the formation of this group. Ress stated,

Probably more than any other factor, it is the passionate eloquence and commitment of Ivone Gebara that has ignited and fanned the fire of these groups. Calling herself a 'nomad,' Ivone travels to the farthest reaches of Latin America to 'accompany' groups (mostly women's groups) seeking a more holistic theology and spirituality. It is not simply her evocative ecofeminist perspective that attracts (mostly poor) women to her courses; it is her sisterly concern for each, her compassion and solidarity that she communicates through a look, a gesture, and a hug. Yet, by her own admission, Ivone is one who adds the *salsa a la sopa* (spice to the soup). It has been Con-Spirando and our sister groups that have been able to provide the infrastructure for her 'spice.' Thus. We see ourselves as key 'hinge' in the ongoing development of an ecofeminist theology and spirituality network in Latin America. (Ress, 2003: 159)

Soon after her return from Belgium, Gebara joined Ress and American queer feminist liberation theologian Mary Hunt to organize the "Shared Garden" theological programme. This programme was organized jointly by Con-spirando and WATER (Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics

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<sup>97</sup> Feminist biblical experts made progress in re-interpreting sacred scriptures through a feminist lens. A major publisher of this kind of work is the biblical journal *RIBLA*, published in Ecuador. See <http://www.claiweb.org/ribla/ribla1-13.html>.

<sup>98</sup> Gebara does not describe her theology by using the term "ecofeminist liberation theology", instead she explains that she employs an ecofeminist perspective in order to critically analyse specific contexts and concepts. Still, throughout this thesis I have described her work as ecofeminist liberation theology due to her employment of notions of interrelatedness of all beings and a sacred view of the Earth.

and Ritual).<sup>99</sup> According to Ress, during each of the three “Gardens”, held in Santiago (January 1997), Washington, D.C. (June 1997), and Recife (July 1998), participants from all over the Americas learned with Ivone Gebara about “unmasking the myth of Adam and Eve’s ‘fall’ from paradise” through an ecofeminist lens (Ress, 2003: 154). From an ecofeminist liberationist theological perspective, the themes and principles explored through the programme were interlinked with discussions on hierarchical systems of power relations (Ress, 2003: 154).<sup>100</sup> During the “Shared Garden” programmes, Gebara stated that to become an ecofeminist represented, for her, “a deeper search for liberation” (1997a: 3). Another dimension had been added to her methodological compass.<sup>101</sup> It is clear that after Gebara’s return, her resistance to the results of historical naturalization processes, such as gender and class hierarchies, also became crucial in guiding her methodology. For Gebara, to contest these unjust dynamics was to contest the power imbalances of society. Likewise, in the Third World women have been fighting for environmental balance for centuries. Their ecological concerns are not due to a natural affinity with the earth but have grown out from acquired empirical knowledge pertaining to working the land and childrearing. From their perspective, to care for the land is to care for their family; it is a mode of survival. In Gebara’s words:

Because of the patriarchal division of work, women are responsible for child care, nutrition and health care in daily life. In the poor neighbourhoods women are worried about a lot of diseases coming from pollution and bad conditions of food and water. So, for women, ecological concerns are linked to daily life. Becoming an ecologist means to enlarge my anthropological perspective and see the importance of taking care of the ecosystem or in very simple terms, to integrate ecology to feminism in a liberationist perspective. (Gebara, 1997a: 3)

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<sup>99</sup> WATER is a feminist educational centre and network. It was founded in 1983 by Mary Hunt and Diann L. Neu in response to the need for theological, ethical and liturgical development for and by women. WATER brings out a quarterly newsletter, *WaterWheel*, among several activities such as the organization of workshops, retreats and counselling focused on helping people to create and sustain inclusive communities in society and religion. For more information see <http://waterwomensalliance.org/>

<sup>100</sup> For more information on the Shared Garden project, see Ress, “Reports from Conferences Introduction to the Shared Garden Seminar, Washington 1997.” *Ecotheology* 1998, no. 4:77-82.

<sup>101</sup> As discussed in chapter three, Gebara has explained that her theological focus is guided by the immediate reality of those most vulnerable in society, representing her theological compass.

Integrating ecofeminism into liberation theology was a step forward in advancing an organic dialogical feminist methodology. Gebara has never claimed that ecofeminism was a third wave of feminism or that global ecofeminists would benefit by learning from the example of theological progression experienced by Latin American feminist liberation theologians. What can be seen in Gebara's theological trajectory is the dual progression of both the criteria of marginalization (to include class, race, sexual identity, and caste) and the methods and tools employed to identify and dissect intertwined forms of oppression. In the postcolonial context where these various positions of subjugation intersect, Gebara found an opening in the in-between spaces. These spaces emerge where various pressures meet. From this state of aporia new interpretations and endeavours can take place. Theology constructed in the in-between spaces does not allow the person to feel comfortable in their detached world, and consequently new ways of seeing and understanding the world emerge. In this light, global ecofeminist theologians have much to gain from increased awareness of the realities of postcolonial contexts, which might lead theologians to enter into a deeper dialogue with their own history as colonizer or colonized. Through a more holistic awareness of history, the ecofeminist argument that all concepts are socially and culturally constructed might lead to theological constructions that have a more positive political impact upon local contexts.

Letty M. Russell (2004) has also explored the dialogical dynamic of feminist movements that gives way to a transformed and more complex view of the multiple levels of cultural oppression. Russell has argued that Northern and Southern women must work together "to respond to past and continuing forms of postcolonial experience" (2004: 24). From Russell's point of view, women in both "colonized and colonizer nations...share in a hybrid of oppression and liberation" (2004: 24). She urges that by joining forces they will empower each other to forge more holistic "critical analyses of the sources and practices of privilege" and combat international and gendered oppression (2004: 24).<sup>102</sup>

Gebara's constant awareness of her own historical context and positionalities stands at the centre of her work. Often Gebara begins her books by situating her social status, culture,

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<sup>102</sup> Similarly, the rise of Asian feminist theologies, *mujerista* theologies and womanist theologies across the globe, contributed to expanding the feminist theological discourse by reflecting on how women's experiences diverge from one group to another. In *Women, Work and Poverty* (1996 [1987]) American feminist theologian Anne Carr reflects on the many issues brought by global feminists. Carr explained that because feminist theologies emerged out of the experiences of middle-class white women, many feminist theologians, including herself, have subjected themselves to the transformative questions brought by diversity of culture, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and religious commitment.

colour and her stand on religious pluralism. In *Out Of Depths* (2002c), Gebara's approach to women's experiences of social injustice and re-thinking the notion of "evil", illustrates my point:

The texts I have chosen give preference to the Latin American experience, but not in any absolute way. I had to look outside my culture for the expression of some of my own intuitions and for certain aspects of evil endured and expressed by women of other cultures and religions. I describe some of my own experience of evil so as to be faithful to the path proposed by feminism and lived by a good number of women in Latin America and elsewhere. (Gebara, 2002c: 11)

Gebara fosters a praxis-oriented methodology that challenges personal identities to their very core. I have intentionally approached the progression of Gebara's theological thinking by highlighting three identifiable phases of her trajectory. A compilation of the introductions written in Gebara's works over these three phases yields a snippet of the progress I have sought to illustrate. Gebara's writing style illustrates this methodology of on-the-move. All her books' conclusions are an open invitation to take her ideas further. Her intention to nurture this organic process is unwavering. Gebara's generosity and solidarity serves as an example of this ecofeminism she has proposed, which is ultimately geared toward the construction of a balanced society. Her theological proposal has never tried to place women at the top or to expose men's lack of nurturing abilities. This is a proposal to open a space where men and women can redefine their social behaviour. Gebara's methodology exemplifies a postcolonial analysis in which, adapting Robert Young's words, "the only qualification you need to start is to make sure that you are looking at the world not from above, but from below" (Robert Young, 2003: 20).

By the turn of the millennium, it became more difficult to locate Gebara's theology in one single movement. Because her main concerns are in forging liberation for the most vulnerable people of society, she is constantly investigating power relations within the Latin American context. As such, her work is based on a dynamic and transforming set of premises. She has not been overly concerned with whether her theology is ecofeminist or feminist, or if her feminist theology is better defined within postmodern or post-Christian discourse. Instead, Gebara's concern is often expressed through her frustration with the existing gap between scholarship and the concrete realities of the oppressed. In the *Sustainability Workshop* hosted by the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting in 2012, Gebara named this gap,

“pollution”. She explained that ecotheologies and ecological theories are allowing the work of some scholars to become polluted. According to Gebara, those scholars have spent more time in scholarly debates instead of paying closer attention to the multilayered realities of others. Eco-social changes will only persuade people to learn about alternative ecological ethical behaviours if ecologists talk and walk a language that can be translated to people’s real needs.

## **5.2 Rethinking Christian Concepts: A Liberationist Praxis**

It is against the backdrop of the complex Latin American context of the 1990s and aware of the fluidity of Gebara’s ecofeminist perspective and political praxis that I propose to explore how the dialogical nature of Gebara’s theology features in her methodology. Here, I say dialogical nature to describe the interconnection between the many layers of Gebara’s theological analysis, which at this stage of her development was informed by feminist and ecofeminist theories and a gender liberationist critique of the socio-economic and cultural levels of society. Above all, this praxis-oriented methodology is continuously open to multi-cultural and multi-religious dialogue. Due to this openness Gebara’s thinking is progressively informing and being informed by others. Thus, some theological concepts, such as the Adamic myth and portrayals of Mary, are invoked in this section in order to show this transformative feature of her thinking.

Gebara has also shown that it is through an ongoing dialogical dynamic that feminism actualizes its political social-justice ethos. One of the main characteristics of Gebara’s liberationist theological work has been the insistence on revealing the ideological character behind every totalitarian or absolutized theological concept (1999b: 58). This theological praxis is primarily an effort to restore critical thinking as a public practice. By relativizing normativity, Gebara exposes the intransigent nature of what she has explained as “colonised forms religiosity” and hopes to set in motion the individual’s own ability to create a space from which a religious ethical praxis of acceptance of difference can be restored. From a holistic ecofeminist perspective, the interrelationality between humanity and other living beings are underlying all Gebara’s discussions of difference, especially in the re-thinking of a new holistic religious anthropological view.

### ***Sexuality as a Source of Liberation***

One of the main points of contention raised by Gebara in her investigation into the naturalisation of women's inferiority inside and outside the church lies in the contrasting interpretations of Eve and Mary throughout the church's history. Gebara agrees with Marina Warner's explanation that differential interpretation of the scriptures shifted from narrative metaphor to the pragmatic ideal of virginity and motherhood, "from religious sign to moral doctrine", and as a consequence of the naturalization of this concept it became the source of the oppressive traditional view of women in religious contexts (Warner, 1976: 49). In *As Incômodas Filhas de Eva na Igreja da América Latina* (*The Stubborn Daughters of Eve in the Latin American Church*, 1989b) and *Teologia em Ritmo de Mulher* (*Theology According to Women's Rhythm*, 1994b: 81-101), Gebara engages the ways in which Catholic representations of Eve negatively influenced social dynamics. Gebara begins by explaining that Eve is the Judeo-Christian symbol that represents every woman. At the same time, Eve became a symbol of evil, and came to signify how evil (and in this context, death) entered into human history. The symbolism of Eve turned her (and through her, all women) into a scapegoat for patriarchal theology.

Gebara's investigation leads to a discussion of the life cycle—birth, growth, aging and death—and to the natural human fear of what one cannot control in contexts of suffering. According to Gebara, it is a natural human urge to ward off all that is perceived as life threatening, uncontrollable or unknown. Gebara explains that although suffering, pain, vulnerability and death are a natural part of life, as much as joy and birth, the relationship between life and death as experienced by humans became progressively perceived as threatening due to its uncontrollable and unknown features. Gebara analyses how the human effort to secure life against death perpetuated the dualistic gap in Western theology that has separated good from evil, God from earth, humanity from earth, and man from woman. Influenced by the work of Paul Ricoeur (1960), Gebara perceives the Adamic myth as symbolic of "an eternal feminine" that is beyond any representation of gender. The Adamic myth symbolises the "mediation of weakness and human fragility" (1989b: 31). Eve elicits not only woman as the second sex and fragile, but the myth is also a medium through which we might recognize that all women and all men are Eve and all women and all men are Adam. Eve is not just the weakest link from which evil, vulnerability and death entered the history of humanity, but she also represents the mystery of life and death feared by both males and females (1989b: 32). Gebara's perspective shows that

humans tend to express their fears through tangible symbols and symbolically women became the expression of this fear. This is because of women's reality of physical embodiment reflected in, for example, the cyclical processes of menstruation, pregnancy, lactation.

Anna L. Peterson has explained that in most of Western philosophy and theology human stress has been placed on transcendence (or, moving beyond the body) and spiritual connection with the abstract, the rational mind, or the universal or God. However, Western philosophy and theology also held the view that women cannot escape their bodies, and therefore they are excluded from partaking in "humanity's distinguishing activity" (Peterson, 2001: 42-43). In agreement with Peterson, Gebara (1989b: 32-33) has attempted to analyse women's oppression by also taking into consideration that the logic of domination has a domino effect. For Gebara, the human compulsion to secure power to ward off vulnerability, symbolically represented by woman's physical processes, has shifted throughout history. The female body as a symbol of fear was replaced by women's embodied historical reality. Many theological readings presented the sexual act as evil and symbolically represented this by woman's vagina and man's erection (Wiley, 2002). From Gebara's perspective, the human behaviour of securing control in the face of the unknown evolved into a complex pattern of securing power to ward off difference. The subjugation of others, evident through the functioning of colonial, imperial and global capitalist systems, has made women, other races, other cultures, and even the earth itself, victims of the need to conform to predefined cultural, religious, and ethnocentric ideals. Through the struggle for power against vulnerability, a denial of humanity's physical condition emerged, as if it was forgotten that it is via the physical capacities of both male and female that life is generated. Androcentric thinking also rejected men's embodied reality as reproducers of life. As a consequence, through what was considered a superior viewpoint, but was actually a biased and limited perspective, all women became Eve and all men became Adam (Gebara, 1989b: 31-32).

It is my understanding that Gebara's feminist anthropology, previously approached in chapter four, foregrounded her holistic analysis of the Adamic myth. By resituating humanity and the divine on this earth, Gebara has dismantled the dualistic view of two parallel histories, the human and the divine. She took into consideration the ways in which societies and cultures construct the *meanings* and symbolizations of divine expression. It was through this process that Gebara proposed the relativization of patriarchal representations of God, which have been traditionally presented as absolute religious truths. The reconstruction of the Adamic myth was

influential in the development of Gebara's holistic views of the divine. In "Uma Leitura Feminista da Virgem Maria" (A Feminist Reading of the Virgin Mary, 2009a: 9-26), Gebara engages how her Marian liberation theology not only contested patriarchal understandings of maternity, but also reconstructed her understanding of what she has called "Divine Mystery" (1995a: 211). Gebara invited feminist theologians to move beyond the disembodied and male-centred Christian representations of the divine and argued that symbolic representations of the divine are expressions of the human's most intimate desires for justice (1993: 174-181). However, Gebara explains that the traditional conceptualisation of justice is subject to a profound denial of vulnerability and death and a search for perfection in an eternal life without suffering or sin. By analysing the all-embracing aspects of Mary, visible in popular religiosity, Gebara re-thought the reasons for the perpetuation of Mary's virginity and maternity. Although, physically it is impossible for a woman be a mother and a virgin simultaneously, this paradoxical reality is part of the symbolic representation of Mary. This is so because Mary represents the one who creates, generates, gives birth, watches over the growth process, relieves suffering, listens, supports, understands, sympathises and receives one after death with her arms open, and still she is untouched. She is a virgin and uncorrupted. Gebara (2009a: 20) reminds feminist theologians that since all religious expressions are subject to anthropological contexts, the popular way to see Mary is not as if she was once created but as creating. In other words, Mary is before the existence of the created world; she has not been created by human sexual encounter. Thus, she is what she is – echoing the notion of "He is what He is" from the Old Testament. Mary is God.

The incorporation of ecofeminist principles on difference and pluralism have been manifested in Gebara's theology by the premise that there is not one 'right way' to understand God, but there are *better* ways that are more attentive to inclusivity. In understanding the symbolisations and meaning-making of cultural expressions of the divine, Gebara urged feminist theologians to move beyond the discussions around God or Goddess. The fluidity offered by the ecofeminist religious discourse enabled Gebara's gender analysis to construct a theological proposal of the divine that empowers feminist theologians to critically analyse the consequences of their own beliefs, while focused on ending dualistic religious constructions. Gebara (2009b: 34) envisions a religious ethical praxis that enables all liberationist theologians, particularly ecotheologians, to clean up the theological pollution caused by dualistic and hierarchical thinking. As examples, Gebara (2009b: 35) mentions the reconfiguration of concepts that reflect



male desires or control, such as God's omnipresence and omnipotence and the traditional patriarchal reading of the Adamic myth.

In light of the above, Gebara (1992: 135-151) has also invited ecotheologians to ground their theological reconstructions in dialogue with those who experience daily life among *sujeira*, those made "dirty" by non-ecological behaviour. Gebara explains that there is an ecological alternative that goes beyond those explored by ecotheologians (1992: 146). The poor's persistent will to survive illustrates an inexplicable faith in life itself. Gebara's experiences among the poor, witnessing this struggle for survival, have given her a nuanced and fresh perspective on a hope that is continually renewed through rituals celebrated globally, irrespective of class, race, or geolocation, such as welcoming a new born into a family or the exchange of wedding vows. Gebara (1992: 147) points out that it is in their own immediate context that the poor not only survive, but also cope with hardship through drinking, dancing, singing, praying, and constructing myths and rituals that remind them of divine protection.

Gebara (1992: 144-145) also states that the immediate reality of the poor does not allow space for sophistic theological constructions of the sacred. Gebara urges ecotheologians to clean up the pollution from sophisticated ecotheological discourse by embracing the simple reality of human vulnerability. Gebara argues that in order to restore moderation and ecological balance to society, we must acknowledge that learning and implementing new forms of spirituality is often a luxury afforded to those who do not struggle for daily survival. New holistic ecotheological constructions must reject theological notions of perfection in favour of the acceptance of human vulnerability with respect to the immediate and particular context. To relinquish control might seem a simple step, but in practice this requires a major paradigm shift for those operating within Christian theology. Ecotheologians face a serious challenge when it comes to encouraging the acceptance of the unknown and the different. Gebara has encouraged ecotheologians to learn from the immediate reality of the oppressed to meet this challenge.

### **5.3 Re-thinking the Human Person**

Ivone Gebara (2012a) has explored through different levels the ways in which the human tendency towards dominating behaviours has historically given way to new forms of oppression, such as exclusivism, classism, ethnocentrism and ecoinjustice. In doing so, Gebara (1994b) has analysed how the androcentric and anthropocentric readings of the salvation project have

historically encouraged people to endure different forms of injustice for the sake of an afterlife free from oppression. Gebara argues that the traditional reading of Jesus' suffering and death has contributed to the perpetuation of economic oppression propagated by neo-colonialism and development projects. Although neo-liberalism and the transnational capitalist system have effectively placed the population "outside the benefits of humanity" (Gebara, 1997a: 3), the dominant apolitical religious mentality, in its various manifestations, has resulted in an apathetic disposition among many Catholics. Analogous to a general illness, the symptom among the population is the assumption that "there is no need for us to think", so we will let the "powerful technocrats think for us" (1999b: 68). Gebara argues that dualism within Western culture has worked to oppress the poor, but the salvation project also indirectly contributed to maintaining this condition by depriving people of the natural human ability for critical thinking and re-creating their own futures (1999b: 68-72). For Gebara (2013), the pedagogy used by the Roman Catholic Church displays a "tutelar" guardianship. Gebara says, "The Church is always telling the individual what to think and how to behave while offering very little space or none at all for critical thinking" (2013).<sup>103</sup> She indicates that this parenting theological style of the Church has resulted in religious apathy to political issues that affect the masses of Latin America.

In *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (1999b: 67-99) and *O Que É Cristianismo (What Is Christianity)*, 2008b), Gebara, from an ecofeminist perspective, presented a transformative theological concept about the human by problematizing the notion of human as unique and above all other beings. It became clear for Gebara how socio-economic and cultural contexts played a central role in shaping a person's understandings of self and worldview. History also shows how anthropological and religious realities influenced emerging forms of resistance as well as agency. One example is the intertwined political and spiritual realities of Our Lady of Guadalupe, in colonial Mexico, discussed in chapter four. Re-thinking humanity's place in the cosmos was a viable starting point for fostering ecological social action, egalitarian political and economic theories, and liberationist religious practice (1999b: 68). The critical analysis of the conceptualization of the human person and God played a central role in the progression of Gebara's feminist argument (see Gebara, 1989b: 10; Gebara, 1991b: 32-35; 1999b: 67-99; 2009a: 9-26).

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<sup>103</sup> Gebara discusses the Church's pedagogy in her recent interview for the TV show *Complicações* in Brazil <http://m.youtube.com/watch?v=Bfm-p-tonnU>.

Gebara's ecofeminist political praxis has been manifested through her theological response to the awareness of multiple worldviews and religious experiences, which most patriarchal theologians have ignored. Gebara dismissed abstract philosophical definitions of the human person as "pretentious reductionism from which we need to liberate ourselves" (1999b: 71). She has also claimed that most scientists, politicians and theologians have shown a propensity for absolutizing certain concepts, ultimately leading to knowledge imperialism. In a similar discussion, Joerg Rieger called this sort of attitude an adaptable form of neo-colonialist behaviour, providing "the basis for continued oppression and exploitation" (2004: 208-209). With respect to the great variety of approaches to reality, Gebara adopted a theological position that argues that secular and religious concepts about the uniqueness of the self or soul are no more than "a tentative point of view adopted in order to deal with everyday life and with the broader sweep of history" (1999b: 70). Going beyond dualistic and hierarchical definitions advanced by "Platonic-Thomistic" thought, Gebara's deliberations constitute a contestation of Christian theologians' propensity to absolutize and normalize theological thinking as divine revelation based on the scriptures.

A similar argument is presented by Peterson (2001), where she critically engages the pervasiveness of normalized dualistic thinking in ecological ethics. According to Peterson, most Western theological and secular philosophies have assumed that humans are superior to nature and have thus qualitatively separated them from non-human species and nature. Superiority is often identified through a "focus on rational thought and the capacity for conceptual language" (Peterson, 2001: 2). Western religions in general also point to an eternal soul directly connected to God as the differential "x-factor" for human uniqueness (Peterson, 2001: 2). With respect to theology, Gebara discussed how the normalized combination of hierarchical thinking and dualistic concepts allowed a space for humans to assert control over the unknown. As previously discussed, humans' inner fear of their own vulnerability gave way to the construction of systematised and linear forms of knowing, leaving little room for doubts or questions. This way of knowing has excluded women's embodiedness and avoided symbolizations of the divine perceived to be linked to women's experiences. Androcentric structuring of knowledge led to anthropocentric knowing, which has given way to sexism, resulting in the ideology that only (male) human experiences are seen as relevant (1997b: 35). Gebara's point can be illustrated through the ideology of colonisation that synthesised the unknown foreign land as a female body

to be conquered and possessed. Gebara (2003c) has argued that Latin American women were regarded by the colonisers as on the same level as nature. Hence, colonized women were “belonging to a different species”, as Kwok Pui-lan has observed (2005: 227). In Pui-lan’s words, “although white women have been regarded symbolically and philosophically as close to nature, in modern times they have never been thought to be other than human” (2005: 227). This problem is addressed by Gebara’s “holistic ecofeminism” as an epistemological alternative to the liberationist theological reconstruction of the human-earth-divine relationship. Pui-lan stresses the multi-layered nature of theological analysis that takes as its point of departure the experiences of oppressed poor and marginalised women in postcolonial contexts (2005: 227).

Gebara re-thinks Catholic systematic theological notions about the human in the light of her own cultural context. For Gebara, any real attempt to re-define humanity must always reflect “what is experienced in the present” (Biggadike, 2010: 327). In her case, a region of violent economic contrasts shaped by colonialism and re-shaped by neo-colonialism led Gebara to reflect on the daily experiences of those who were excluded from processes of religious construction in order to destabilize notions about the Christian soul and its pre-established destiny. In this way, the embedded and embodied realities of contemporary poor women were recast as the alternative ground—a moving-ground—for ecofeminist epistemology. For Gebara, it is the outcast, the marginalized of today’s world, who render visible the unbalanced consequences of an absolutized theological anthropology (Gebara, 1999b: 82). This insight, however, is not only relevant for today’s world or for Gebara’s context. To reflect on the outcast’s experiences in any society is an exercise that is vital to all people who search for a different future, as well as to those who seek to expose naturalized forms of oppression.

In order to foreground her reconstruction of the conceptualization of the human, Gebara analysed the role that understandings of human autonomy in antiquity played in the development of early Christianity, and its historical influence on the development of a culture of superiority in the Western context. In *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (1999b: 67-99), she developed this analysis in dialogue with Emmanuel Mounier’s work, *Personalism* (1952). According to Mounier, among ancient cultures there was a common understanding that humanity “was subject to the will of Gods and bound to a preestablished destiny” (in Gebara, 1999b: 78). In Greek antiquity, life was accompanied by an unalterable destiny that required struggle in exchange for freedom. However, the final victory seemed always to be subject to the

will of the Gods or destiny. This notion can also be identified in the Old Testament traditions, manifested in the understanding that every person has a pre-established mission to accomplish in life. In this context, “if a child was born with a physical defect...the most likely question would be, Who sinned and caused it to be born this way?” (Gebara, 1999b: 71).

According to Gebara, Christianity began by defending the value of the human person and individual autonomy as a strategic reaction against the existing oppressive cultural context (2008b: 23). Any attempt to change the daily injustices was implicitly deemed as futile. Therefore, the human potential to forge transformation was devalued and a generalized attitude of disdain against invalids, the sick, women and children became fixed. The importance of defending the autonomy of every person was a strategic move “in order to allow for some balance in people’s lives” (1999b: 71). Against this oppressive cultural background, Christianity began to reclaim human autonomy, freedom and value. This process went as far as the defence of the existence of the person of God, “and of God taking on our own personhood” (Gebara, 1999b: 72). Through incarnation in Jesus, God became identifiable in the human person, including “those who were not ordinarily recognized as persons”—the outcasts, sinners, slaves, lepers, and prostitutes (*ibid.*).

The initial respect that Christianity showed for human life led to the gradual religious construction of an unchanging essence within each human being. This essence was made out to be something Godlike, spiritual, and was directly linked with God. The divine presence within the human gave value to the person and gave the individual autonomy in the face of the pre-established order that was manifested through other religious traditions. However, the notion of the human as filled with a Godlike essence reflected a specific image of God. The Gods from the ancient world had control over the lives of humans. The Christian God also had this power, but the Christian God was believed to be the one true God that was fighting for the oppressed, as represented through Jesus’ life and teachings. To possess God’s essence symbolised the idea of individual freedom in that historical context. According to Gebara’s *O Que É Cristianismo* (2008b), the Christian idea of a unique human essence combined with the struggle for justice to lead to expectations of social change. In the wake of Jesus’ death, this expectation reached a climax. However, as history unfolded and social injustices persisted, a growing feeling of frustration forged a new development. Because humans were directly linked to God and God belonged to a supernatural order of transcendence, the true person, the Godlike essence within,

did not belong to this world. Christians believed that humans had an eternal destiny preordained by God and so they took on the notion of “citizenship” in heaven. This idea was related to the belief that human beings are the sole beings created in God’s image, also evidenced by God’s decision to incarnate as a human male to reconnect with his creation. Gebara explained that Mounier (1952) recognized in the development of the Christian idea of autonomy “a qualitative historical leap in the evolution of our understanding of the human person and in the attainment of our humanity” (in Gebara, 1999b: 79). For Mounier, the human ability to think represented a source of freedom: “Freedom is intimately linked to rationality.” In fact, Mounier saw freedom as the unique prerogative of rational beings; it stood in opposition to what he called the ‘irrational’ natures of other beings, which are essentially subordinate to ourselves” (*ibid.*). In line with traditional Christianity, this view placed human beings at the centre of creation, at the top of the hierarchy of all creation and closest to God. Consequently, this view also failed to acknowledge humanity’s interrelationship with the earth.

Mounier’s *Personalism* (1952) inspired generations of activists and intellectuals in the fight for human rights. However, his belief that humans were the centre of creation strongly supported the perpetuation of the notion of two orders of being, one natural and the other supernatural. The existence of two parallel domains, worldly and spiritual, and the tension between their historical values were re-stated by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in 1994, paragraph 366: “The Church teaches that every spiritual soul is created immediately by God—it is not ‘produced’ by the parents—and also that it is immortal: it does not perish when it separates from the body at death, and it will be reunited with the body at the final resurrection” (in Gebara, 1999b: 80). The catechism’s view of humanity shows the perpetuation of a theological idea about the superiority of the human essence developed more than two thousand years ago. For Gebara (1999b: 81), the perpetuation of anthropocentric superiority is marked by an utter discontinuity between God and God’s creation. The catechism makes clear distinctions between the magnitude of God, the smallness of humanity and the irrationality of the rest of the creation. In addition, the catechism re-states the doctrine of Original Sin, women’s second-rate status, and men’s special privileges in relation to the rest of creation. According to Gebara, this type of oppressive understanding does not reflect the first impulse of Christianity, which valued the outcasts of society and justice for them.

Underpinning Gebara's ecofeminist theological praxis is her re-thinking of human creativity and Christianity's first impulses of justice. Gebara (2008b) explains that Christianity started as a movement based on people's experiences of oppression. However, it also developed under the influence of a naturalised patriarchal and domineering understanding of God. During the fourth century C.E., the combination of Christianity and imperialism contributed to promoting human uniqueness in a "dogmatic, absolute, univocal, and unlimited way" (Gebara, 1999b: 72). Gebara (2008b) raises the point that underlying this project was the human fear of vulnerability, leading to increased attempts of self-assertion and the desire for power. Christians' fear of losing their autonomy led to orthodoxy. The children of God started acting as a law unto themselves, indeed embodying God's law. Gebara states:

From this deceptive autonomy, the step to claiming the right of intervention was an easy one—especially as it was taken up as a habitual behaviour by the great western powers. Economic and/or military intervention has been permitted and even justified in the name of the self-determination and development of peoples. This justification, which was partially inspired in religious traditions based on the Judeo-Christian heritage, grounded itself on the claim that it was necessary to help backward, enslaved, and underdeveloped peoples to arrive at a level of evolution more in accord with the progress of all humanity and with the 'will of God.' In order to 'help,' it became legitimate to use intervention, interference, coercion, and murder. In order to foster 'development' or 'freedom,' it became acceptable to displace customs, beliefs, and divinities. In the name of 'progress,' we could destroy the earth and its inhabitants, because the most important thing was that the 'word' of those who possessed the truth be preached and become victorious. (Gebara, 1999b: 73)

The orthodox Christian understanding of what it means to be human not only imposes an exclusive model of autonomy, but also, in colonized lands, imposes an exclusive model of cultural and economic dependency. Gebara (1999b: 73-75) observes that the violence and individualism that prevails in today's globalized society, and colonizers' attempts to eliminate all indigenous, African and Asian traditional understandings of the human person, are enough evidence to inspire the construction of transformed notions about the human within Western philosophy and theology.

### *Expanding the Understanding of Relatedness*

Gebara's proposal to overcome the dominant culture of hierarchical worldviews within Western contexts demands various corrective measures that men and women must responsibly develop and learn to carry out (1999b: 76). This challenge entails a reflection on facing the fear of humanity's own vulnerable nature. This fear is made manifest through the notion of a transcendent destiny and the tendency to surpass one's self in the quest for immortality (1999b: 79). According to Gebara, humans would benefit from learning to embrace the shifting reality "that makes us up, and not exclude from rationality other dimensions that are just as much part of our being" (1999b: 88). She invites men and women to reflect on the ways in which they are directly, indirectly and interdependently linked to all living beings, and how this interdependency has an impact on every level of their network of relationships. Gebara envisions knowledge and power that will overcome "exclusivist dualisms, not only on the theological level, but also in our social, economic, political, and cultural relationships" (1999b: 81).

Gebara's ecofeminist anthropological proposal bears semblance to an analogy of a child reaching maturity. Initially, children's limited awareness of their surroundings is due to the restrictions imposed by their age's immaturity and irresponsibility. Therefore, they need the help and constant interference from their parents. The traditional belief that human beings are the centre of creation and closest to God in the hierarchy of creation, represents this child-parent relationship of dependency. However, in this case, the child grows up with a self-centred worldview. At the time he/she reaches adulthood he/she is still holding on to an egocentric childish behaviour, which compromises an adult's development of maturity and responsibility. Because God is in control of everything and all injustice will be overcome in heaven, social injustices have been tolerated in this life. Humans have not learned to take care of future generations through the development of ethical principles and values because their own value and citizenship were not of this earth. They belonged to the new heaven and the new earth. Here, it is evident how important it is for Gebara's liberationist aims to propose a new holistic anthropology. This anthropology is intrinsically related to developing a responsible human that has the potential to advance social changes. Her ecofeminist political praxis emerges as one and the same with her liberationist's aims.

Gebara intends to replace this classical Christian anthropology and cosmological understanding by starting with the acknowledgement of an intimate and "articulated bond with



the earth and with the entire cosmos” (1999b: 79). This bond is what Gebara calls relatedness. Relatedness is the primary reality of all that is or can exist. It is the “underlining fabric that is continually brought forth within the vital process in which we are immersed. Its interwoven fibers do not exist separately, but only in perfect reciprocity with one another—in space, in time; in origin and into the future” (Gebara, 1999b: 83). Gebara’s understanding of relatedness as a constitutive dimension of personhood is the result of her search for a theology in which the experiences of both men and women are equally integrated. Here, the evolutionary quality of Gebara’s critical and constructive thinking clearly emerges. In chapter four, the ways in which Gebara incorporated women’s reality into theological discourse were identified. By arguing that the related experiences of male and female should play equal roles in the construction of religious anthropology, she proposed a theology that was moving from a male-centred to a human-centred anthropology. Due to the dynamic and responsive nature of her framework, Gebara expanded this notion of human relatedness by incorporating aspects of holistic ecology into her thinking. Gebara found that human individuality does not end with humanity’s innate characteristics and its network of relationships. There are more components built into the “fullness of being that brought [one] forth” than the human consciousness can grasp (1999b: 83).

For Gebara, the first thing to be affirmed in a holistic ecofeminist perspective is the “collective dimension” of a person, which is not only anthropological but also “cosmic” (1999b: 83). If relatedness is understood as the primary “reality of all that is or can exist”, it is most likely that this notion would become the most elementary form of understanding relationships amongst all beings (1999b: 83). This collective dimension expands the properties of personhood beyond the person into the cosmos. Relatedness, then, becomes “more elementary than awareness of differences or than autonomy, individuality or freedom” (1999b: 83).

In *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation*, Gebara (2002c) articulates her aim of creating a space through which people can revisit, readapt and correct their ‘heritage’ understanding of what it means to be human. Consequently, new expressions of the divine may take shape according to new categories of thinking and relating to the earth. Central to this project is the notion that the human is firstly a being-in-relationship, followed by consciousness, and then personal creativity. This strategy reveals life as a network of relationships in process, which “cannot be sustained without all kinds of bonds” (Gebara, 2002c: 134). The connection, the correlation, and the interdependence that exists between and among all

things is what creates and sustains life (Gebara, 2002c: 133). The sacred is no longer understood as something outside of the created world, but rather as this mystery-energy that brings life forth. Gebara states, “Holistic ecofeminism holds that God is in all—and therefore all is sacred” (1995a: 212). Gebara hopes that new generations of people are inspired to replace hierarchical worldviews with ideas premised on interrelatedness. Instead of a pyramid, a web of life is more illustrative of this new sort of relationships.

#### **5.4 A New Ethic as an Ecofeminist Liberationist Praxis**

In *Out of the Depths* (2002c: 132-142), Gebara re-thinks the prevailing notion of evil in the Western theological context. She draws attention to the consequences of this notion throughout history. The evil that Gebara exposes is not related to that which humans inflict personally, but rather the evil that people (especially women) endure through different forms of suffering. This is an evil present in institutions and social structures that accommodate or even facilitate it. People can experience this type of evil unconsciously; they may endure it without recognizing it as evil. Evil might be accepted as fate and destiny, or possibly God’s punishment for sin. This kind of evil is embedded in the socio-cultural naturalization of injustice and unethical collective behaviour. By unethical behaviour, Gebara is specifically referring to indifference towards injustice. Gebara (2002c: 2) argues that in order to denounce injustice within society, a critical conscience about forms of evil must be developed in order to make its depravity evident. Gebara explains that “in the case of events intermingled in our culture, education, and religion—events or behaviours regarded as normal, common, even good—it is not easy to spot evil’s presence even when we suspect it is there” (2002c: 2-3). For example, the sexual division of labour has been naturalized to such an extent that the evil present in the domestic sphere, the hierarchy and exclusion that so many women in their obedience to God often blindly endure, is not included within either the official theological discourse or the liberationist critique of evil.

In “Terra: Eco Sagrado” (2009b: 22-35), Gebara engages the use of the word ‘nature’ in theological discourse and its influence on social dynamics. Gebara starts with explaining the development of the theological idea of an existing perfect world before the creation of humanity. The word *nature* comes from the Latin *natura*, which means existence without human interference (2009b: 24). Due to the dominant androcentric interpretation of the Adamic myth, the idea of a perfect natural world, as purely good, preceding humanity, gave way to theological

views of humanity as completely devoid of evil before sin entered the world. Evil was an outside force that entered the world due to Eve's inability to follow God's will. Because God was viewed as ultimately good, everything that was created by God was perceived to follow God's (good) natural order. After sin, however, human beings, who once enjoyed this perfect nature, had to apply themselves in ways that reflected the goodness of God as this was no longer an inherent comportment of human nature (2009b: 25). Patriarchy turned this idea of returning to natural perfection as God's will into a natural universal law. The androcentric interpretation of the Adamic myth resonated with the construction of a salvific plan that disregarded women's experiences. Since man was believed to be created before woman, he was also understood to be closest to God and the one that could escape physical embodiedness and reflect best the goodness of God. Therefore, it was as a man that God chose to incarnate and it has commonly been through men that divine revelation found expression. The persona of Jesus and divine 'natural' law were used to justify human hierarchies. Subsequently, humanity's higher goals of spirituality, underwritten by anthropocentrism, supported a division between culture and nature. At a conceptual level, Gebara's analysis shows that humans are not only the creators of the ideas that are deemed to be natural, but also the ones who have defined nature and what is natural. Hence, they are also the creators of the many ways in which naturalised concepts have unfolded in society (Gebara, 2009b: 23). Against this backdrop, Gebara argues that humans have created all existing divine laws regarding humanity (2009b: 26). In view of this creative ability, Gebara also recognises that all that is known about the natural world is based on human assumptions. Gebara charges the traditional theological understanding about the natural world being created for humans' consumption with oppressive and utilitarian behaviour towards the earth. On the other hand, Gebara re-states the value of human creative capacities for liberating theologies. To re-think nature opens a space for new possibilities through which the human-nature relationship can flourish.

Gebara maintains that to include ecological notions in theology is to make theological constructions local. In other words, to be in tune with global ecological concerns is only valid for a liberationist praxis if the ecological concerns raised pertain to local realities. In particular, Gebara stresses that women's experiences of evil must be locally exposed. She contends that ecotheologians must become aware of localised experiences of injustice. Judith Plant (1990) envisions a society in which people learn how to provide for their biological needs in a biocentric

manner. She invites people to step out of anthropocentrism and learn how to survive on this earth in a friendly manner with nature. Gebara's ecofeminist liberationist proposal includes the view that ecotheology must develop locally grounded analytical tools that provide possibilities for social and ecological justice. The goal is to re-learn how to relate to nature as well as how to understand one's own place within the cosmos in solidarity with others. Gebara's understanding of relatedness is an opportunity for recreating religious ethics. If people become aware of this idea of relatedness and work in re-adjusting this concept according to their own reality, relatedness has the potential to forge new projects of egalitarianism. Relatedness, in Gebara's theological proposal, also means interdependency, which is the "very stuff that creates and sustains life, that nourishes life and allows it to grow" (2002c: 133). Gebara's ecofeminist proposal invokes principles of difference in order to foster and promote a transformative global ecofeminist religious ethics. In a study on the global economic gender gap, Maylin Biggadike (2010: 319-340) critically analyses the globalisation of capitalism and exposes the disproportionate effects on women. By applying Gebara's ecofeminist perspective on relatedness, Biggadike proposes an alternative Catholic ethics that empowers women situated in the Third World.<sup>104</sup> Biggadike advances Gebara's ecofeminist perspective as one that "privileges the common good while respecting the integrity of all beings, individually and collectively" (Biggadike, 2010: 329). According to Biggadike (2010: 329), it is through her ecofeminist perspective that Gebara enables a person to responsibly consider not only the impact of any action on themselves, but also to take seriously the effect that action may have on different social groups and communities of human beings and non-human beings who live together on the same planet. This bio-diverse image is in line with current holistic ecological theories, which, according to Gebara, serve as starting points for better ways of including plural experiences and perspectives. Gebara's ecofeminist proposal is an attempt to forge a theology and ethical praxis that remain in touch with the day-to-day experiences of women and non-human nature (Gebara, 2002c: 136) and restore a person's natural ability to re-create his/her own future (Gebara, 1999b: 68-72). For example, the idea of a web of life enables the person to see that "if one element is affected, the whole is affected" (2002c: 134). It is through this proposed ecofeminist ethics of liberation that Gebara hopes to restore in the human the ability to realize the interconnection

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<sup>104</sup> See "An Ecofeminist Approach to the True Wealth Project" (2010: 319-340) for more information on Biggadike's elaborations of an ecofeminist ethics.

existing between the human and earth, to accept the unity between mind and body, spirit and matter, and the entire constitution of the self, including intuition, emotions and feelings (good and bad), as well as a recognition of the multiple and fluid subjectivities that make up personhood (Gebara, 1999b: 88). By restoring this dialogue within, Gebara has envisioned an emerging religious ethic that fosters an awareness of inter-religious dialogue and contributes to bridging the gap between theology and practice.

## **Conclusion**

According to Homi Bhabha (1994), it is the in-between spaces that provide the meaning of culture. As such, this thesis has also argued that it is also in these spaces that the multi-layered forms of oppression are clearly reflecting the injustices present in immediate socio-cultural contexts. Gebara's ecofeminist theology can be seen as an important contribution to both ecofeminist thinking and liberation theology as she draws attention to these in-between spaces. Her theology has been inclusive of the daily experiences of those who have been excluded from theological discourse. Gebara's perspective is reflective of her personal experience with people from the urban slums of Pernambuco. However, her thinking has also been developed through a conscious multi-cultural and multi-religious dialogue between the Latin American context and the Global North. In highlighting the different ways that the postcolonial contexts of Gebara's surroundings have revealed how worldviews and behaviours are continuously transforming in order to survive, this chapter has demonstrated that in women's experiences of daily oppression can be found a resourceful alternative for dialogical dynamic. The issues that I have stressed throughout this thesis render visible the continuing importance of these transnational exchanges and networks.

In retrospect of Ruether's proposal of a shared space where Northern ecofeminist theologians could broaden their horizons of understanding by entering into deeper dialogue with ecofeminist theologians in the Global South, I have discussed the significant role that Northern feminist and ecofeminist theories have played in shaping and informing Gebara's theological thinking. After establishing this idea, I have also argued that Gebara's theology emerges as a new syntheses. Although situated in the Latin American context, there are components of both hemispheres weaving through her thinking. The idea of being embedded in a world in motion is highlighted through Gebara's holistic anthropological proposal as the very notion that fosters

awareness of interdependency. For Gebara notions on interdependency and interrelationality between all living-beings are empowering because they dismantle ideals of human superiority and allows the space to learn in community. In light of Gebara's theological trajectory, the alternative option in developing ecotheology that is grounded on the immediate reality of oppression will be restored to the centre of ecofeminist theological discourse and concrete social and ecological justice will become closer to reality. Moreover, in revealing knowing as process, Gebara's holistic ecofeminism calls ecofeminists to not only rethink their place and role in relation to the earth, but urgently in relation to Others. This represents another way in restoring the political side of religion in the centre of the ecofeminist theological debate.

Throughout this chapter it has been discussed that although liberation theology developed a praxis-oriented methodology, male liberation theologians demonstrated an inability to embody or perform this approach. Althaus-Reid (2009: 2-3) described this inability as a result of orthodox patterns and power, which seeped into the liberationist imaginary. Male liberation theologians' inability to evolve and to adjust to social changes blocked their ability to move forward. The notion of 'moving forward' seemed to represent, among these theologians, a change of focus or even a betrayal of the cause. Gebara, among other feminist liberationists, tried to explain that the feminist liberationist focus was also the poor, but that they understood the poor and the problems of poverty through a more inclusive and expanded gender lens.

Gebara's theological engagements reflect how the increasingly difficult relationship between male and female liberation theologians developed into a theological and cultural gap. This gap, however, contributed to Gebara, among other feminist theologians, standing up and seeking a liberation theology more in tune with her reality. The nature of Gebara's feminist liberation theology is organic, in motion, and therefore one of the most liberating strategies offered to feminists and ecofeminists today. Once theologians and feminists understand the empowering process present in Gebara's transformative theories, new ideas, perspectives, attitudes, ethics, and relationalities will undoubtedly emerge.

In examining the progression from feminist liberation theology to "holistic ecofeminism", this chapter has exposed the reality of one of the paradoxes of the postcolonial situation in Latin America. Although formal colonialism has ended, from a feminist perspective our postcolonial reality is still fraught with ambiguities that stem, in part, from the pervasive and unaddressed legacies of patriarchy. As previously discussed at chapter four, the reality of

imperialism and colonialism still constitute a contextualised present reality, a point argued by Fernando Segovia (1998) and Kwok Pui-lan (2005). While liberation theology has opted for the poor featuring forms of resistance during postcolonial times, the emerging of feminist and ecofeminist liberation theologies have highlighted liberation's theologians resistance in readjusting its own discourse in order to benefit others at the margins, in particular women. The dualistic reality of hierarchical and male-normative structures established by colonialism and sustained by neo-colonialism may not oppress all to the same degree. However, those who are concerned with ending oppressive forms of colonial and neo-colonial structures can, as exposed by Gebara's theological trajectory, continuously examine their reality of oppression in relation to their own history. In the same light, one can also examine their reality in relation to the kinds of pressures they impose, and how "we still operate with their presuppositions and how we continue to benefit from them" (Rieger, 2004: 209). It is in this light that I have suggested in this chapter and throughout this thesis that Gebara's ecofeminist perspective challenges all liberationist scholars to pay more attention to the reality of their own history and contexts, in order to realise how the presuppositions of colonialism are still finding ways to emerge, and in some cases even thrive. This is a point also relevant for all ecofeminist theologians who are interested in overcoming contexts of oppression and ecological injustice in the postcolonial realities experienced by the colonised as well as colonisers, as Russell has phrased (2004).

There are three points that are recurrent in Gebara's theological trajectory that I would like to draw attention to in this conclusion. First, as a feminist and liberationist, Gebara's ecofeminist perspective articulated that men and women have equal rights to enjoy full humanity through a dignified process. Such a statement is loaded with implied strategic moves and re-conceptualizations. The next two points emerging from Gebara's theological trajectory are part of those above mentioned strategies, as they affirm the personhood of marginalized groups, especially women, and reconstruct a politically egalitarian faith. According to Gebara, it is the fight for the right of one's own autonomy and the socio-cultural recognition of one's full humanity within oppressive contexts that has forged revolutionary social and cultural changes in history. Latin American history is full of stories of resistance to oppression, almost all of which are intertwined with religious beliefs and practices. For Gebara, an ecofeminist theology must expose and respond to intertwined forms of oppression and naturalized forms of "social evil". By making visible the reality of oppression and evil, women will begin to resist injustice as their

own personhood experientially intersects with these modes of subjugation. Through a balanced understanding of the relational reality of humanity with the earth, Gebara envisions a process of restoring human creativity and agency. This process must be profoundly informed by and responsive to the historical trajectory of all beings. Due to the organic nature of such a project, difference and individuality no longer represent a problem.

Gebara's political theology surfaces through the construction of an alternative ecofeminist theological and ethical praxis informed by the critique that through a long historical process, generalized and normalised dualistic thinking has restricted human agency. Gebara has argued that by locating humanity's true nature in the heavens, patriarchal theology introduced separation. In order to overcome the 'separatedness' among human communities and in relation to the earth, Gebara re-positioned humanity's true nature in the earth, while also stressing human relatedness to the entire cosmos. She has explored the inherent power and capacity for movement that reside within individuals (Gebara, 2000a). Hence, individuals are not only moved by unknown and external forces. Rather, while individuals must be aware of the external actions moving and shaping their context, they must also be aware of their own agency and their own interrelatedness with the world. Certainly, Gebara's ecofeminist theology does not privilege sameness over difference. According to Plumwood, "we must acknowledge continuity and cease to view the other as alien, but this does not involve the dissolution of distinction or privileging community over difference" (1993: 126). Gebara's holistic ecofeminist proposal is the embodiment of a liberationist ethical consciousness, which balances intersecting concepts of difference and relatedness. Furthermore, in positioning God as also part of the cosmos, Gebara's ecofeminist theology by encouraging devotion to this mystery that generates life, maintains life and interconnects us all, liberates the person from seeing the Earth as an object for consumption and exploitation. Underlying Gebara's ecofeminist political praxis is the hope that by establishing the earth as sacred, the bio-diverse image of life will be restored in the centre of theological discourses. Consequently, a transformed religious ethical praxis encourages people to behave in ways that is reflective of believing that the earth is sacred. Anthropocentrism hopefully loses ground, allowing the space for nascent alternative human-nature relation. The awareness that we are all part of this evolving system of life, not above or below other life forms, humanity is revealed as not superior, but as playing a different role in the Earth's community.



Gebara's theological aim to dismantle forms of hierarchical dualism is exemplified through the ways in which moments of suffering and theological conflicts throughout her theological trajectory challenged her own thinking. Gebara did not cling onto her feminist theology, trying to prove some sort of ultimate truth. When Gebara was sent to Belgium by the Vatican she did not leave her faith and she did not stop her work in reconstructing this faith. She was, however, exposed to new thinking, to new teachers and to new realities. She opted to see these new realities as contributing to her own organic growth. She faced her own limitations and vulnerabilities in those circumstances. These experiences informed her thinking, making it more critical but also more open; her theology did not stop, did not stagnate and did not regress. Through the struggle, Gebara continued her search for a liberating and egalitarian theology. She arrived at an ecofeminist theology from the in-between spaces.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION: GEBARA AND ECOFEMINIST HORIZONS

#### Introduction

This thesis set out to explore the ecofeminist perspective and theological work of Brazilian feminist liberation theologian Ivone Gebara. Her praxis-oriented methodology prises open a fecund space for a continuous dialogical dynamic between Northern and Southern ecofeminist theologians. Her theological work has echoed ecofeminist points of departure by investigating and exposing existing patriarchal theologies and their impact on the well-being of women and nature in the context of Latin America. Furthermore, Gebara's work illuminates the need to emphasise the practical aspects of faith together with a strong commitment and openness to pluralism, difference and critical thinking, required for nascent political ecofeminist praxis.

Northern ecofeminist theologians, particularly Rosemary R. Ruether (1996) and Heather Eaton (1998; 2001), were identified in this thesis as critical interlocutors in analysing the transformative dimensions of Gebara's work as they also importantly seek the advancement of a North-South ecofeminist dialogical dynamic that foreground the need for increased socio-economic awareness and political praxis. Eaton (2001: 76-78), for example, proposes that the ecofeminist religious discourse might be strengthened by incorporating socio-economic critiques, developed by ecofeminists across the globe, into theological responses to ecological degradation. Similarly, my investigation into Gebara's work and theological trajectory reveal powerful strategies that enable a political ecofeminist praxis that narrows the gap between theory and practice in the global ecofeminist religious discourse.

Ivone Gebara's ecofeminist perspective forms part of her compound liberationist framework, which is primarily informed by the daily experiences of the poor in the context of Latin America. Gebara's liberationist framework is grounded on the immediate realities of oppression experienced by the poor women from her own contexts of struggle and in solidarity with the colonized and marginalized peoples of Latin America. Her ecofeminist perspective, I argue, is a hybrid theology that emerges from the in-between spaces—spaces breached by local and global ideological encounters and negotiations common to postcolonial contexts. The hybridity of Gebara's ecofeminism emerges as a third-way of ecological praxis situated in the

global context. Her holistic anthropology similarly emerges as a way of restoring the political side of religion, freed from the dualistic modes of thinking that have permeated Western traditional philosophies.

In this thesis, I particularly wished to draw attention to Gebara's notion of the immediate, which sparked her search for a more elaborate cultural and socio-economic analysis than what previously proposed by liberation theology. The notion of the immediate was explored by using postcolonial theory, particularly the analysis advanced by the Comaroffs (2012). According to the Comaroffs, the Global South represents the dialectical products of a global world in motion, its content historically shaped "by everyday material, political and cultural processes" (2012: 47). Conversely, Gebara's theological trajectory renders visible a hybrid ecofeminist perspective in motion, resulting from the ongoing encounters and negotiations between North and South feminist theologies and Southern male and female liberation theologians. I have argued that Gebara's ecofeminist perspective highlights these specific sets of connections between human experience and theological practice in view of North-South convergences and disparities. In light of the discussions and findings herein, this concluding chapter argues that the restoration of the political aspect of religion into the centre of the global ecofeminist religious discourse represents an important shift as the need to interrogate theological functions and meanings for the immediate reality of each locality is a priority. This chapter further explores this notion of the immediate in dialogue with the realities of oppression emerging from the Global South and North.

Additionally, in this concluding chapter, I synthesise the ways in which Gebara's localized theological constructions can inform ecofeminist political praxis more globally, and the extent to which her liberation theology can offer cross-cultural insights into the political ecofeminist theological goals in liberating women and nature. I have divided this chapter in three sections or three interrelated levels of analysis. The first level of analysis examines Gebara's commitment to social change as an insight for ecofeminist theologians who seek to liberate women and nature. I argue that her strong commitment to social change weaves through her spiritual praxis, and is fully manifested in her praxis-oriented methodology. Gebara's liberationist awareness, meaning her own consciousness of the ongoing relationship between theory and practice, grounds her work on deconstructing naturalised oppressive norms, as well as guides her own life. This first level of analysis, which I have entitled 'personal commitment', is

offered as a starting point for developing ecofeminist liberationist praxis in the global ecofeminist religious discourse.

The second level of analysis, draws attention to Gebara's liberationist commitment to develop an alternative and transforming religious anthropology. Gebara's theological trajectory has been marked by her insistence on empowering the individual through constructing theology in community. In tune with the immediate needs of local communities, Gebara seeks to liberate and empower the individual through encouraging critical thinking and restoring creativity. This second level of analysis is entitled 'commitment to others'.

The third level of analysis is a nuanced analysis of Gebara's alternative religious anthropology. In particular, I focus on ethical as well as cosmological and spiritual dimensions of her anthropology that together inform Gebara's biocentric perspective and commitment to liberating nature through a holistic praxis. Gebara's understanding of the divine as mysterious energy that brings forth life and interconnects all that is alive, is a clear example of her reconceptualization and reconstruction of the divine. This third level of analysis is entitled 'commitment to the Earth community'. In this last section, Gebara's holistic ecofeminism is presented as enabling the individual to responsibly consider not only the impact of any action on themselves or the effect that action may have on different social groups, but also to take seriously the impact on the communities of human beings and non-human beings who live together on the same planet. I argue that the bio-diverse image of the process of life from Gebara's liberationist perspective illuminates the importance of engaging the immediate, current and material human reality. As such, I propose that the notion of the immediate offers an alternative to a shared global ecofeminist ethical praxis as well as facilitates religious ethics that remain in touch with the day-to-day experiences of women and non-human nature, while also empowering the human to restore his/her own ability to re-create his/her own spiritual praxis.

### **6.1 Personal Commitment as an Ecofeminist Liberationist Praxis**

Gebara's praxis-oriented methodology, introduced in chapter one and explored more thoroughly in chapter three, is 1) grounded on the experiences of the outsiders of society, more precisely the poor women from the North of Brazil, and 2) in critical dialogue with local and global historical developments. I have described Gebara's methodology as "constructed upon moving ground". In

my opinion, the dynamics between theory and practice within local contexts, highlighted in Gebara's work, presents a more integrated methodological option for a global ecofeminist praxis.

Throughout this thesis, I have invoked stories from Gebara's personal life in order to demonstrate how her work extends beyond the professional and pervades the personal. Such an approach reflects the importance of rendering visible experience as a source of knowledge. The porous relationship between the personal and the professional is also a recognition of how knowledge is always subjectively constructed. Gebara's own personal beliefs of liberation reverberated, as it progressed, throughout her scholarly trajectory. Her body of work has been described in this thesis as an example of theological embodiment, demonstrating the practical aspects of the personal commitment required to promote a genuine ecofeminist political praxis. Gebara's theological evolution, from being a liberation theologian to a feminist and ecofeminist scholar, has demonstrated her personal commitment to liberation for the poor from a socio-economic liberationist lens, to then include notions of gender oppression and later ecological concerns. However, here I want to draw attention to a deeper level of personal commitment witnessed in Gebara's life that I argue is essential to furthering global ecofeminist aims.

It seems that while Gebara was fighting to liberate the poor, simultaneously she was liberating herself from naturalized patriarchal structures. I find this idea of a co-evolving liberationist process to be a pattern in Gebara's theological trajectory and I argue that this pattern liberates the self from androcentric and anthropocentric normativity, which represents the first level of analysis, or rather 'self-analysis', for ecofeminist political praxis.

Liberation theology started by expressing a profound personal commitment to end oppression in order to liberate the poor. Central to the liberationist discourse was the praxis of bridging the gap between practice and theory through increased attention to the experiences of the oppressed. However, Gebara's theological trajectory reveals that the liberationist praxis remained subjected to normalised patriarchal ideologies. While male and female liberation theologians fought for the liberation of the poor, the latter group were also fighting for their own liberation from culturally constructed gender norms in the public and private domains.

Gebara's autobiography and work demonstrates how her encounters with the experiences of others provoked the awareness that women needed to be liberated from patriarchal oppression on a deeper level than what had previously been articulated. Gebara's meeting with a group of industrial labourers, during the late 1970s, for example, made her realise her own complicity in

the patriarchal power structure as she, at that stage, did not sufficiently address women's concerns and experiences.<sup>105</sup> From that moment onwards Gebara took women's invisibility as a theological and existential challenge as she realised that not all socially engaged theological discourses foster liberation for women. Gebara was profoundly alienated from many women's everyday realities, but above all from her own reality as a woman. She stated, "I began seeing what I never saw before, the female body, my own female body is a space of social and cultural oppression" (2005a: 123).<sup>106</sup> The paradoxes exposed in Gebara's encounters with others revealed how she, though aware of the everyday grind of working-class women in her own life, was not yet aware of women's oppressive conditions. She was not yet in tune with the various levels of cultural oppression that poor mothers, married and single, endured. She realised that the liberationist process ought to be more than searching for an end to socio-economic oppression. Gebara also realised that scholars and theologians are, by virtue of their own professional locations, often oblivious to certain forms of marginality. To recognize and act on a discursive aporia illustrates the ways in which the in-between spaces, existing in each context of oppression, can be used in the struggle for liberation of women across the globe.

Thinking about theology from the in-between spaces helped Gebara to progress into a new phase, from which she began understanding the multi-layered levels of oppression present in her own socio-cultural context. As highlighted in chapter one, Gebara's insistence to walk the path of liberation led her to confront her own deep-seated patriarchal thinking. Gebara demonstrated how, through her own tenacious determination to liberate herself from culturally constructed and oppressive roles, feminists and ecofeminists can advance a transformative liberationist praxis that concurrently emancipates the self, others and nature.

Gebara's ecofeminist theological perspectives, deeply intertwined to that of her own situatedness, resonate with her strategic steps toward liberation. Embedded in a context where human survival take precedence, while also attending to the immediate culture and people's interrelationships, Gebara seeks to contest gender and ecological injustice by revealing naturalised social inequalities. Her liberationist praxis produces a language that the Christian population can relate to. In doing so, she labels social, spiritual and theological indifference towards women and nature as evil. Gebara's analysis of the natural human urge to ward off all

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<sup>105</sup> See chapter one pp. 31-32 for a full description of this event.

<sup>106</sup> My own translation.

that is perceived as life threatening and uncontrollable, discussed in chapter five, influenced her view on how the mystery of life has been feared by both men and women due to their own vulnerability in contexts of suffering. For Gebara, evil, as traditionally explained by patriarchal theology as an outsider and intruder, has its origins in the human tendency to fear what cannot be controlled in contexts of suffering. In religious contexts, the notion of evil is wrapped up with humanity's finite condition—illness, pain, sadness and death are understood as consequences of sin and the work of evil spiritual forces. For Gebara then, the normalization of dualistic theological concepts that have separated humanity's embodied experiences from the imagined, perfect spiritual world and future life are a manifestation of an unresolved denial of the vulnerability and finitude of humanity, namely the fear of death.

Gebara developed a theology grounded in the material and present human life by embracing human limitations, and unifying the earth and heaven within the theological discourse. Embracing human limitations represented for Gebara the abandonment of all theological concepts around perfection, including the teachings of a perfect human nature before sin, a perfect heavenly life, a perfect divinity who knows everything, a perfect behaviour for woman and for man, and a perfect world. In liberating theology from the ideals of perfections, the foci of Gebara's liberationist praxis has unearthed all naturalised forms of evil and qualitative difference and presented a bio-diverse egalitarian earthly community.

Considering an ecofeminist liberationist praxis that is grounded on the immediate cultural and social contexts of marginalised women, Gebara's ecofeminist analysis highlights the awareness of cultural differences and the oppressive conditions traversing various contexts. On the one hand, the immediate as a category of analysis encourages learning in solidarity as the particularities of social contexts challenges normative or universal assumptions. This practice of using the immediate as an analytical lens results in the construction of contextualised and cohesive strategies that inform positive social change. On the other hand, this analysis must be sensitive to the ways that dualistic threads existing in particular contexts have contributed to one's own distorted understanding of human vulnerability. Gebara explained that by excluding concepts such as finitude, mortality and vulnerability as part of an ideal future world, the Christian tradition devalued qualities that are realities of this world.

An ecofeminist liberationist praxis that encourages self-analysis can contribute to the restoration of balance to society in a more integrated way. Gebara invoked human embodiment

as a central component of subjectivity and as part of reality. She affirmed that human desire is what changes the world. If one is not aware of how dualism has distorted his/her own ways of understanding reality, s/he become incapable of empathising with other people's challenges. According to Gebara, empathy for people's suffering fosters solidarity, and this is what affects, constitutes and enables a person to transform praxis in relation to personal or social events. This is where the co-evolving pattern (previously mentioned) emerging from Gebara's thinking becomes evident. While a global dialogical dynamic fosters more integrated and nuanced ecofeminist lenses as well as grounds ecofeminist strategies, it also prompts self-analysis. The two working together is what makes 'personal commitment' an all-embracing process.

Another example of Gebara's own liberationist praxis can be seen in the ways that she rethinks what 'regionalist' and 'universalist' notions represent for a holistic ecofeminism, discussed in chapter five. In essence, Gebara articulates a regionalist ecofeminist analysis by contextualizing processes of knowing. In dialogue with the contextual cultural and economic realities responsible for shaping men and women's experiences and subjectivities, a regionalist ecofeminist analysis gives precedence to local historical contexts in the investigation of the root-causes of oppression, as well as in the reconstruction of liberating ecotheologies. This regionalist ecofeminist analysis is nonetheless informed by the universal interrelationality between humans and nature. An ecofeminist perspective that takes into account that religious knowledge constructions are under the influence of the person's 'located way' of understanding his/her own place and role in relation to the earth and all-living beings, forges an ecofeminist theological praxis bounded to regional and universal dialogical dynamics. Gebara stresses the local character of knowing and the limitations of spatiotemporality as the universal aspect that all forms of knowing have in common.

The processes and transitions evident in Gebara's scholarly work have followed this co-evolving way of knowing and of being in relation to others, which in the immediate needs of today's world reflects an openness to learn from all living beings and non-living things. Gebara's ways of knowing-and-being express a mode of epistemological humility and generosity. This generosity and humility, as a mode of relationship, reflects the central themes of ecofeminist proposals around ecological and social ethics. In view of Gebara's 'on-the-move' embodied methodology, an ecofeminist epistemological praxis takes place through embodying a dynamic state of openness characterized by humility and generosity. This epistemological praxis sets in



motion a person's own liberationist process. Hence, a person and a person's way of knowing, represent the local/regional dimensions within Gebara's ecofeminist perspective.

As mentioned above, Gebara extensively discussed how socially and culturally constructed ideas on human superiority and the eternal attempt to return to perfection forged hierarchical and exclusivist modes of human relationships. In order to re-construct an egalitarian society, Gebara's life trajectory illustrates an ecofeminist liberationist praxis of humility, in which human limitation and the finite condition are valued and embraced. Once a person comes to terms with his/her finite condition this represents a step towards liberation. By accepting limitation and vulnerability the human opens up to the experiences of others and partakes in knowledge construction. A pre-disposition to value difference as informative and as an essential component of knowledge construction ruptures with idealistic attempts to explain the unknown through the lenses of a perfect and benevolent deity. The awareness of human limitation and the immediate reality as source of knowledge is a practice that has the potential to forge critical self-reflection and to render visible the impossibility of universalised perspectives. Through a praxis of solidary knowledge exchange, and in light of human and ecological diversity, a liberationist process that includes self-analysis is set in motion.

In reflecting on cultural and socio-economic aspects of the immediate context, Gebara worked to deconstruct social and ecological injustice by demonstrating how human behaviours are shaped by patriarchal normativity. Re-thinking the concept of evil, she proposed that evil is all oblivious human behaviour in the face of injustice. By problematizing how dualistic and patriarchal theologies normalized hierarchical oppressive social divisions, Gebara expressed that traditional theology was one of the root-causes for generalised apolitical behaviour and non-critical thinking. She argued that traditional theology leaves little room for doubt or questioning, and gradually limits critical thinking, creativity and self-analysis. To overcome dualistic thinking and the gaps that it has caused in human relationships and between human and non-humans is an ongoing process, which Gebara envisions to overcome by first embracing notions of limitation and difference. The awareness of limitation is employed in Gebara's praxis-oriented methodology to construct theology informed by a process of cross-cultural and multi-religious exchange of knowledge underlined by a praxis of self-analysis.

## **6.2 Commitment to Others as an Ecofeminist Political Praxis**

In order to explore how a socio-economic analysis not only has become a central concern to ecofeminist theologians, but also to show how a socio-economic analysis creates greater compatibility with feminist liberation political praxis in the Global South, chapter two explored the early roots of ecofeminist critique in the Global North. An emerging form of ecofeminist praxis in the examples of women, such as Gibbs, were approached and situated as illustrating initial ecofeminist attempts at social and ecological justice. In an effort to grapple with her own oppressive social context, Gibbs made a public issue of environmental degradation. Thousands of people were mobilised by her lobbying to protect the health of her own family and those of her neighbours residing in contaminated areas. I have often pondered about the nature and type of experiences that bring forth a shift of consciousness and lead women like Gibbs, a self-proclaimed apolitical housewife (see Gibbs, 1982), to commit her life to promoting concrete social changes. On this question, Gebara's holistic anthropological proposal illuminates a window into possible changes in awareness and commitment in the behaviour of people who have been oppressed by the ecological crisis and prize open the underlying multiple forces promoting it.

Gebara has dedicated most of her theological work to constructing an alternative religious anthropology that empowers individuals to exercise independent thinking and self-analysis in order to overcome apolitical tendencies and resist oppressive socio-economic and cultural contexts. In view of her critique to the Catholic Church's "tutelary" pedagogy that places the person in a state of permanent dependence, Gebara forged social transformation by starting with the person. For Gebara, the effectiveness of any liberationist movement lies with its ability to prompt the practical aspect of awareness or, as called by liberation theologians, a "spiritual praxis". According to Gebara, it is by critically deconstructing normalized dualistic and oppressive religious norms that the theological liberationist task ought to teach people about their ethical and political responsibilities.

In chapter four, Gebara's alternative anthropological proposal was outlined, highlighting three main concerns: 1) the need to develop a realistic anthropology that could serve as a unifying praxis; 2) expose the inadequacy of a theological history that divided God from earth and naturalized forms of hierarchical oppression, and 3) cultivate a pluralistic notion of relatedness between all beings and their contextual networks. These three concerns were stressed

through the four anthropological categories, namely, human-centred, unifying, realistic and multi-dimensional anthropology.

In chapter five, the transformed version of Gebara's feminist anthropological proposal was explored in light of her trajectory. I labelled her anthropological proposal 'holistic' and explained how notions on inclusivity and relatedness were profoundly incorporated into her thinking. Moving from a 'human-centred' anthropological orientation, she proposed an 'inclusivist anthropology' in which the human-earth-divine relationships are at the centre. This theological move was identified in this thesis as a logical progression from Gebara's commitment to the poor and her theologizing of the immediate reality of her own local context. I also highlighted that, for Gebara, 'local' represents the interconnection between one's own embodied subjective reality to his/her contextual networks of relationships. In this way, Gebara's thinking reflects her own immediate reality as well as the liberationist process set in motion in her own life. Illustrated by the many organic processes that living beings undergo, Gebara's thinking is continuously changing, evolving and adapting according to its environmental surroundings. Yet, she is aware of the global processes that also affect her own local environment. Conceptually, Gebara's holistic anthropology potentially sparks a similar liberationist process in the lives of others. The originality of her strategy is in accepting human limitations and respecting difference and plurality. In this way, her anthropological proposal enables the liberationist process for the individual, while being sufficiently fluid to allow the liberationist process to take shape according to individual subjectivities and positionalities, both locally and globally. Gebara's anthropological categories were constructed not only to liberate the individual from theological concepts that stagnates instead of stimulates, but also to create fertile ground where the person can fruitfully develop a new and responsive spiritual praxis.

Gebara's anthropological proposal is constructed at the intersection of overlapping contexts, pertaining to 1) indigenous and African-Latino centred discourses, from which notions on difference and religious pluralism were brought to the centre of the Latin American feminist theological discourse, 2) the conflicting relationships between male and female liberation theologians, which contributed to exposing the depth of dualistic thinking in the Latin American cultural context, and revealing male theologians' resistance to realistic gender liberation, 3) the backlash from the Vatican that lead to Gebara's theological re-education, and 4) the exchange of knowledge between Latin American and Northern feminist theologians. These intersectional

contexts have been introduced in this thesis from a postcolonial perspective, and argued in this chapter as forming part of the multiplicitous forces influencing Gebara's theological trajectory.

As previously mentioned, when various positions of subjugation intersect, an opening is created: the in-between spaces. I argue that the in-between spaces that emerge where various pressures meet are spaces existing through the particularities of each global context of oppression. From this state of aporia new interpretations and endeavours can take place. Global ecofeminist theology constructed in the in-between spaces does not allow the person to feel comfortable in their detached world, and consequently new ways of seeing and understanding the world emerge. From the in-between spaces, Gebara's theological anthropology has bridged many gaps caused by dualistic thinking and hierarchical behaviours in her own local context. As discussed in chapter five, feminist theologian Letty M. Russell has also proposed that both Northern and Southern women "share in a hybrid of oppression and liberation" (2004: 24). The in-between spaces are a result of the political and cultural dialectical processes between colonisers and colonized countries, which are also part of the existing experiences of colonising countries. Thus, Northern feminist and ecofeminist theologians also benefit from applying tools used in the encounter between intertwined forms of oppression, such as those articulated by Gebara. I agree with Russell that Northern and Southern feminist and ecofeminist theologians must come together "to respond to past and continuing forms of postcolonial experience" (2004: 24). It is by joining forces that a shared ecofeminist critical analysis of the sources and practices of privilege more effectively combat global forms of gendered oppression.

In light of the above, I argue that a shared global ecofeminist political praxis can be advanced by learning not only from Gebara's proposed holistic anthropology, but also from her compelling example in integrating what she has learned from the immediate reality of her own contexts of struggle into theological construction. In chapter three, I analysed the ways that the socio-economic and political histories of Latin America led Gebara to redefine her liberationist theological methods guided by an analysis of the dynamic between the pragmatic and the mythical. On the one hand, the socio-economic immediate reality determines people's basic needs and material desires. On the other hand, the needs and desires forged by the immediate replicate themselves in the mythical. For Gebara, religious constructions of the sacred are partially an expression of people's most profound immediate needs. In order to construct theology that is of genuine transformative value, the connections between spiritual and material

needs underlying the human's immediate cultural reality must become a compass for theological practice.

During the 1980s, the reality of immediacy forged by the capitalist economic system and increased inhumane living conditions for all in Latin America, led the discussions within the CBCs to shift from a political reading of the scriptures to become determined by the population's immediate physical and material needs. Gebara began observing among the population a generalized shift in behaviours and beliefs shaped by this cultural dynamic arising from the contexts of exacerbated poverty. According to Gebara, the population began searching for religious responses for immediate relief. In this context of suffering the human natural desire to feel in control led many people to re-establish their loyalties and faith to the Catholic saints and traditional religious practices. The need to be in control was projected into the certainty of being protected by a superior deity. Many found immediate hope and comfort in traditional beliefs and in a heaven free from suffering, but consequently, this theology did not forge liberation, nor did it facilitate critical thinking among the population. Gebara called this particular dynamic the "culture of immediacy". The culture of immediacy demonstrated how human experiences took precedence over religious experiences, and reinforced dualistic and hierarchical views of the divine.

In critically analysing this reality and by adopting 'the immediate' as her theological compass, Gebara used the immediate socio-cultural and religious contexts as a thermometer that measured theological functioning and its meaning for the immediate reality of the people. On another level, 'immediacy' forged a shift in Gebara's views of the theological task. Throughout this thesis it has been discussed how, for Gebara, theology ought to teach people the importance of critical thinking. It is, however, my view that the notion of the immediate progressively forged a paradigm shift in Gebara's theological position. Here, I would like to draw attention to how the culture of immediacy contributed to how Gebara framed her holistic anthropological proposal as well as how this holistic anthropology challenges ecofeminist theologians to re-think the importance of advancing alternative anthropologies to enhance a global ecofeminist political praxis.

Once the idea of the immediate is accepted as a category for theological construction, global ecofeminist theologians are invited to foreground humanity's subjectivities and positionalities as the main influences of religious expressions of the sacred. The immediate

reality confirms how religion is in fact an expression of human creativity, shaped by humans' limited cultural knowledge and influenced by contextual needs. Gebara, among others, articulated that religious constructions are part of human history and, as such, the images of the sacred express one's deepest needs in relation to the immediate reality. In this way, representations of the divine are partially reflective of a particular society's social priorities.

As discussed in chapter five, Gebara proposed to Latin American feminist liberation theologians to end anthropomorphic discussions about God or Goddess. Because of the influence of patriarchal and dualistic culture, it is difficult to see how anthropocentric and anthropomorphic images of the mother or father can represent egalitarian ideals within today's world. Through analysing the present in light of past history and in dialogue with others, Gebara's holistic anthropology envisions the liberation of the individual from dualistic thinking and, consequently, the possibility of searching within ourselves for the origins of religion as well as for resources for alternative religious constructions. This is not a return to anthropocentrism; it is the opposite. It is an attempt to escape dualistic anthropology. If humans are capable of rethinking their place and role within the cosmos through a holistic anthropology, notions of interdependency and interrelationality between all living-beings become liberating and empowering as they dismantle ideals of human superiority and allow for a space wherein learning in community is a priority.

In recognising one's own interconnection and interdependency with the Earth and each other, religious expression emerging from the immediate human reality will potentially take on a new format and praxis. From an ecofeminist liberationist theology perspective, to become divine is to restore a religious ethic of justice and solidarity. By unifying earth and heavens, good and bad, God and humanity, a shift in responsibility takes place. The guarantee of a better future world is no longer upon God, but it is placed upon the person and the community. In the same way, Satan is no longer responsible for social injustice. Rather, it is part of one's own social responsibility to deal with forms of evil emerging from an unresolved self/other dualism.

From Gebara's ecofeminist liberation theological perspective, the person is empowered by acknowledging her/his ability to be creative and to think critically. Dualistic theologies and philosophies have used the human ability to rationalize as the means to justify human superiority over nature, and thus qualitatively separated from non-human species. However, a theology that

holistically encourages the person to embrace vulnerability and death as part of the natural course that all living beings undergo is a theology that alternatively appeals to human logic.

In clarifying that death has entered the world, not due to an evil outside force but as an intrinsic force in human history, good and evil are restored as part of human nature. Such a simple concept renders visible to the believer how the immediate contexts of previous eras have influenced the conceptualisation of good and evil. In addition, it highlights humanity's ability to create and mystify concepts. Empowering ecofeminist liberation theologies, on the other hand, values human creativity by encouraging the individual to develop an alternative relationship with the Earth through notions of interrelated dependency between humanity and the earth. Simultaneously, ecofeminist liberation theologies reveal the human tendency to control in ways that inspire self-analysis. Gebara's anthropological proposal, by restoring unity between body/mind, spirit/matter and human/nature, contests notions of ontological superiority. To value human creativity in order to bring an end to forms of dualistic thinking and behaviour cannot be misunderstood as a recurring theological attempt to construct a perfect future or to return to perfection, because there are no perfect pasts in which perfect humans existed. Gebara's anthropological proposal is an attempt to consciously restore in the person, male and female, consciousness of their natural human condition. For Gebara, ecofeminist liberation theology is about resituating the human as intrinsically part of this Earth and eliciting human ethical responsibility.

The political aspect of Gebara's holistic anthropology surfaces as a praxis of destabilizing eternal transcendental truths by highlighting the dominance of dualistic patriarchal and anthropocentric theologies. By making clear the human responsibility to construct new ecological and inclusive religious ethics, human embodiedness and embeddedness become explicitly recognized as central resources for theological production. Notions about the divine will always be subjected to time, space, culture, problems, and actual persons. In accepting theological constructions as subjective constructions, the theological task as explained by Gebara is to welcome nascent notions that resonate in a co-evolving theological pattern. Advancing ecofeminist theologies that are in dialogue with their local immediate reality in a global context reveals the notion of interrelationality. Being part of the many processes existing in the context of the immediate cultural and socio-economic realities emerge as what we all have in common. The immediate reality of each context reveals how we are all interdependently part

of a global world in process. In this light, notions of being-in-process and a deity that is co-evolving with human history foreground the ecofeminist political praxis of a North-South dialogical dynamic in which our co-evolving processes are acknowledged. Furthermore, this ecofeminist political religious praxis takes shape by informing and transforming the individual via a process of self-reflection, informed by the ways that life is experienced locally and globally. Ecofeminist religious discourses contribute to a global shared strategy of emphasising local experiences in order to forge theological constructions that result in a new religious ethical praxis—one that is responsive to today’s most basic needs.

### **6.3 Commitment to the Earth Community as an Ecofeminist Liberationist Spiritual Praxis**

Throughout this thesis, I have argued and demonstrated that Ivone Gebara adopted an ecofeminist perspective from her commitment to liberating poor women. In reflecting on the theories behind Gebara’s practice, I found that the ‘immediate reality’ of poor women’s daily experiences underlies her theological and ethical constructions. In this concluding chapter, I have re-stated the questions that this thesis is built upon by confirming that Gebara’s theological trajectory can offer strategic insights that enhance a political praxis within the global ecofeminist religious discourse. Gebara’s ecofeminist perspective represents a bridge between practice and theory, pointed out by Rosemary R. Ruether (1996) and Heather Eaton (2001). However, in this chapter I have proposed the immediate reality of marginalised women as a category for the advancement of a global ecofeminist political praxis. While the immediate reality from a particular locality is a resource for theological constructions that are inclusive of marginalised women’s experiences, it has been also argued that it is only through a North-South dialogical dynamic that a shared ecofeminist liberationist praxis will emerge.<sup>107</sup> Through a global ecofeminist practice of knowledge exchange, multi-layered social and intimate forms of oppression traversing diverse cultural contexts will be revealed.

Gebara (1999b), among others, argued that normativity and dualistic behaviours are difficult to extricate from patterns of Western social relations. For this reason the ecofeminist understanding of the sites of injustice must remain fluid. On the one hand, establishing the immediate reality of marginalised women as a category for ecofeminist theological analysis

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<sup>107</sup> See for example the work of Letty M. Russell, Letty, “Cultural Hermeneutics: A Postcolonial Look at Mission” (2004) and Kwok Pui-lan’s *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (2005).



foregrounds the insights from postcolonial scholars that local contexts are products of a global world in motion. The forces underlying local social and cultural contexts are much more complex than the ways that reality presents itself to an individual. On the other hand, it is in light of the immediate reality that intertwined forms of oppression are problematized as part of global and local processes, and is part of what makes up the fabric of reality as experienced by women. In other words, the experiences of other women assemble support for political mobilization by hindering critical reflections on difference and diversity within our communities.<sup>108</sup> Nonetheless, the awareness of the concept of a global world in motion, underlying the analysis of the immediate, forges an efficient ecofeminist political praxis that destabilises homogenized experiences of oppression and offers ways to overcome them. In dialogue with the particularity or contextuality of others, one's own positioning wherever one is located, is challenged. The individual's experiences of reality become a resource for a critical global ecofeminist theological analysis. Moreover, this ecofeminist praxis highlights not only that historical and current power structures are predicated upon naturalized male experience, but also the ways in which they have led to the development of a variety of oppressive behaviours to which women across the world have unconsciously adhered.

During the 1980s, Gebara became increasingly aware of the multiple ways in which the degradation of the earth affected women and children. Gebara's struggle against contexts of poverty was enhanced by the realisation that capitalism was not only destroying the environment, but that it was above all making it impossible for women and children to escape their own oppressive contexts. Consequently, Gebara's understanding of social justice became combined with the need for ecological justice. The immediate reality of oppression, experienced by poor women, transformed Gebara's theological understandings around intertwined forms of oppression. Initially, in order to liberate women, Gebara proposed an empowering feminist anthropology, which fostered critical thinking and the restoration of self-value. Through this anthropology women were enabled to contest patriarchal gender roles by realising that religious and socio-cultural teachings about a woman's submission to man, or underlying notions of female inferiority, were not originally divine instructions, but rather a result of social and cultural patriarchal constructions.

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<sup>108</sup> This insight about hindering "critical reflections on diversity" is a point particularly stressed by Rita Nakashima Brock in "Pacific, Asian, and North American Asian Women's Theologies" (2007: 45-54).

However, as explained in chapter three and five, during the 1980s Gebara re-thought the depth of these intertwined forms of oppression by witnessing the reoccurrence of dualistic and hierarchical religious practices within the popular liberationist movements in Latin America. During the 1990s, Gebara located dualism and hierarchical oppression at the heart of Christian theology, specifically in the dominant patriarchal way that God was conceptualised throughout the Christian tradition. She explained that despite the progress made by liberation theology, the dominant symbolic world offered by Christianity in Latin America remained the same: “patriarchal in structure and...also distinctly dualistic and hierarchical” (Gebara, 1999b: 125). Consequently, Gebara proposed a new Christian cosmology. This Catholic nun dared to re-imagine human life, God, evil and salvation from a woman’s perspective. Gebara incorporated notions such as embodiedness, embeddedness, interrelatedness, difference and biodiversity, overlooked by patriarchal theology, into Christian theology and spirituality. She envisioned God through a panentheistic lens, as a better alternative to promote social and ecological justice for the alarming needs of today’s interconnected global and local world. For Gebara, a theology that is unifying instead of dualistic is a theology that finds in the processes of life symbolic images that realistically represent the sacred. Life processes that are part of the immediate reality of every human being become the main resource for reconstructing the human-earth-divine relationships.

Through this thesis, I have prioritized Gebara’s anthropological constructions over her panentheistic understanding. This decision was based on the fact that, for Gebara, the Catholic Church, among other Christian denominations, traditionally used a paternalistic and tutelary pedagogy, which cultivated dependency among the poor, leaving almost no space for critical thinking. To counter this, Gebara encouraged the construction of alternative religious expressions by empowering women to develop critical thinking from holistic anthropological perspectives.

In *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*, Gebara (1999b: 124-125) explained the complexity involved in speaking about God from a panentheistic perspective to the poor women in the Latin American context. As discussed in chapters three and five, Gebara located two concurrent discourses that perpetuate representations of the divine as a paternalistic God that knows everything and is in control of everything. First, she identified the dominant socio-economic system that perpetuates contexts of poverty, suffering and the need to feel

protected. Second, she critiqued the traditional patriarchal theology that does little to offer empowering and liberating images of God. I read Gebara's holistic anthropology as a strategy that exposes gender oppression by uncovering normalized patriarchal theology and anthropology. Her holistic anthropology sets in motion the liberationist process. The liberationist process that is so familiar to Gebara's own life experiences becomes the key to develop new images of the divine that is empowering and responsive to the needs of contemporary contexts.

Gebara proposed to Latin American feminist liberation theologians an alternative Christian cosmology that advances the idea of a human-earth-divine interrelatedness by bringing forward the view of belonging to this earth. She attempted to encourage feminist liberation theologians to produce theologies that understand, and above all experience, the human as a being in communion with all that exists. This new cosmological view is the framework that undergirds her ecofeminist liberationist praxis. It is by re-positioning the human and the divine as intimately interconnected and part of the cosmos that Gebara's ecofeminist liberation theology is grounded in the immediate reality. Instead of drawing from a human constructed imaginary spiritual world, Gebara adopted as her main theological resource this earth in order to continuously construct a theology that resonates with life in process and restores a positive attitude towards the life cycle of birth, growth and death. I have identified the following notions as fostering ideas of bio-diversity for emerging theological constructions, namely, 'knowing as process', 'the interrelationality of all living beings', 'intertwined forms of oppression', 'global dialogical dynamic as a political praxis', and a 'panentheistic understanding' that situates the earth and its life process as sacred.

Gebara, by integrating into her theology the cosmological understandings forged by scholars like Thomas Berry and Sally MacFague, echoes the view that Earth is a single, unique and sacred body that requires balance between all its different parts—humanity included—in order to survive. Gebara integrated into her cosmology the wisdom she learned from indigenous traditions, that "virtue lies in moderation". She has since voiced a theology that encourages people to return to moderation, and expresses this as a human (though not exclusively) virtue. In chapter five, I explored the processes of Gebara's theological trajectory that led her to embrace the understanding of humanity as an intrinsic part of this sacred earthy body. She increasingly developed and taught an ecological ethical praxis of moderation and balance. In embracing the view that humans are intimately linked to the Earth's processes of evolution, Gebara accepted

modern scientific discoveries and theories about the Earth and human evolution. In certain ways, scientific knowledge led this once anthropocentric and androcentric Catholic theologian to move towards liberation. Gebara stated, “I have abandoned my exclusively anthropocentric (human-centred) and androcentric (male-centered) view of the world. I have begun, then, to feel the life within me in a different way” (1999b: vi).

Employing a holistic anthropology, Gebara continued her work of empowering marginalised women by explaining that God has not pre-determined their immediate reality of oppression. Introducing theories of human evolution, Gebara destabilized religious gender norms by demonstrating that the root-causes of women’s inferiority and oppression have names: patriarchy, capitalism and ecological injustice. In teaching poor women about historical processes of patriarchal dualistic constructions, a space was opened to critically re-think the goodness of God. For example, by claiming salvation for today and explaining the implications of such an idea by unifying humanity’s history with this world history, Gebara encouraged women to develop a different attitude towards the Earth. Moreover, by introducing notions of a life in process, Gebara taught that forms of patriarchal and economic oppression were continuously changing, and thus also open to positive change.

By accepting the immediate reality of marginalised women’s experiences as central to ecofeminist theology, global ecofeminist theologians can foreground a spiritual and ethical liberationist praxis that returns balance and moderation to social and ecological relationships. Learning from Gebara, we can conclude that the main ecofeminist theological task for today’s world begins with the question: How do we encourage ecological ethics by restoring to Christian discourse the central role of humanity on earth without falling into dualistic and hierarchical patterns? Subscribing to a reification of ecotheologies that revamp hierarchical understandings between the earth and humanity, for example through advancing notions of stewardship, do not address the problem of a self/other division. In my view, embracing the perspective that the divine and the human are a part of the earth, completely redefine the theological task and its subject.

Poverty and women’s marginalisation are the most pressing issues for a global ecofeminist liberation theology, as it begins to restore a spiritual praxis of self-analysis. According to Gebara (2010b: 44), the possibility of generating ecological ethical praxis has been compromised not only due to the person’s inability to develop a more responsible and life-giving

attitude towards the earth, but also due to the inability of the theologian to develop new methodologies that are transformative. Agreeing with Gebara, I believe that the global ecofeminist task is to locate in the immediate context of one's own community the root-causes of anthropocentrism and androcentrism, and contest them through advancing a more profound, as well as realistic, alternative view of men and women as equally interconnected with the Earth's life processes. Sophisticated ecological attempts of God-Talk seems to only reach a few privileged people within society while the earth is being rapidly destroyed and poor women even more oppressed.<sup>109</sup>

Nonetheless, my argument above must be contextualised. Of course, ecofeminist scholars are encouraged to continuously revisit, contest and reconstruct notions of cosmology, anthropology, ontology, teleology, among others. However, it seems that in order to provoke concrete social and ecological transformation the immediate reality of marginalised women's experiences seems to be a logical and reachable theological compass. Once this theological compass is established, ecofeminist theologians must critically investigate their own historical contexts and its relationship to local and global realities of oppression. Through this critical investigation I envision ecofeminist theologians finding the role that they must play locally in order to unify the gaps caused by dualism and capitalism globally.

It seems that the primary challenge for ecofeminists is to convey a holistic anthropology that stresses a balance between two fundamental notions. The first is a holistic ecofeminist anthropology that restores self-value to the marginalized. It begins by facilitating processes of liberation of people from hierarchical forms of oppression by teaching interrelatedness. Interrelatedness brings forth the notion of belonging to this Earth, because the Earth is understood as sacred, and by extension, humanity shares in this sacred order. The second notion concerning this anthropology is the encouragement of humility and self-analysis in the believer in order to understand his/her own dualistic and patriarchal ways of oppressing others. Above all, ecological and social responsibility is the practical aspect of a liberationist awareness. In recognising humanity's finite condition, the individual is encouraged to embrace the reality of their own vulnerability as part of a life in process. In doing so, the awareness of the human-earth interrelationality inspires the development of a sincere bond with all other life forms.

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<sup>109</sup> This discussion could easily, and fruitfully, lead to a constructive engagement on informed strategies to form new small faith communities, where a common language capable of duly respecting every group is developed. This type of project is something that I envision to develop in the near future.

I would argue that the main theological task for this current world is no longer a focus on God-talk, but rather developing a unifying Christian spirituality and ethical practice. A strong commitment to the Earth community emerges as an ecofeminist liberationist spiritual praxis. Because the divine-human relationship is reconceptualised as belonging to this Earth, the spiritual realm is no longer a separated and unknown realm, it is here and it is present in the immediate reality of every living being. Theology becomes an attempt to unify the pragmatic and the mythical. This is to say, by uniting the self with the Earth, the theological task is on how to assist the believer to direct spirituality into engaged ethical praxis. Furthermore, in positioning God as a constitutive part of the cosmos, inspiring devotion towards this mystery that generates and maintains life, the very experience of being in a world in process emerges as a source for the advancement of an ecofeminist political praxis. Once the believer is liberated from ideals of perfection and pre-defined dualistic and anthropocentric teachings, they are enabled to develop a more open-ended empowering way of relating to the divine. Bonding with the Earth begins to flourish once men and women no longer understand themselves as superior to the natural environment, seeing it as an object for consumption and exploitation, but share with all other life that equally inhabit this sacred earth.

Ecofeminist theologies generally hold the view that by highlighting humanity's interconnectedness with the Earth, this world will become a more pressing issue and result in the development of responsive religious ethics. This position, combined by the notion of the immediate, forges a realistic direction to restore a central gap left behind in Christian traditional spirituality and anthropology: the unresolved issue of a perfect human nature before sin and the dream of a perfect human life after death. Inspired by Gebara's holistic ecofeminism, the repositioning of "evil" or injustice as part of human history strategically exposes a human nature that is ambiguous. To deny that humans have a natural tendency to dominate, or superimpose their wishes to perpetuate dualism, is to escape from the ethical responsibility of dealing with the injustices or "evil" that humans enact. For Gebara, placing blame on a spiritual entity, such as Satan or sin, for all the earth's "evil" perpetuates unethical behaviour towards others. The awareness that humanity always has been capable of enacting both good and evil renders unnecessary this pattern of searching for a perfect human nature, perfect past, or a perfect afterlife. Without the dualistic options, moderation begins finding space. Perfection and superiority should no longer be ideals to be sought. By valuing the present through an

ecofeminist liberation spiritual praxis, it is more likely that a new ethic imbued by more profound forms of humility and generosity will emerge.

Assisting in learning how to restore balance within his/her social and ecological relationships is also one of the main tasks for ecofeminist spiritual and ethical praxis. Noting the co-evolving system of life, and humanity's place as neither above nor below other life forms, humanity is revealed as playing a different role in the global community. Once the ecosystem is in imbalance, different species are negatively affected. The ethical task for today's globalised world is finding balance among difference, thereby relinquishing the human need to control as well as teaching the individual how to live harmoniously among diversity and difference. The real spiritual conflict between evil and good is re-interpreted by the everyday ongoing effort to acknowledge one's own tendency to seek control and to superimpose normativity in order to avoid issues of difference, vulnerability and suffering. This is a praxis of learning ways to accept others and to develop humility in order to be open to new information. In addition, to practice generosity in order to learn moderation helps avoid falling into the dualistic trap of universalising forms of knowledge and life experiences through categories of superiority and inferiority. The ecofeminist ethical task is to work in consolidating the awareness that we are not superior but just another species that is part of the ecosystem's bio-diversity.

Spiritual praxis that is realistic, unifying and inclusivist is a praxis of 'humility' because it has a limited ground—a local ground—where projects are simple, realistic and finite. This is also a spiritual praxis of 'generosity' because it is committed to the good of the whole earthly community, and envisioning oneself as an intrinsic part of the larger whole to which one bears responsibility. Gebara's theological trajectory has first of all been local, embracing humanity's limitations, and open to global discussions—to learn from others and above all to share. Therefore, her theology is playing its local part in this global world in process. In other words, this form of spirituality is not disembodied but is an intimate expression of an ethical praxis. Such a view takes the feminist insight that the "personal is political" to a new level. To foster processes of self-reflection with respect to global realities, theological constructions must be informed by the immediate realities of women's oppression, from their own contexts. An informative and transformative ecofeminist political praxis strategically emphasises particularity in order to achieve plurality, thereby illuminating a balanced and inclusive process moving towards liberation.

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